QUINLAN
EVA MARKS

Quinlan

Eva Marks

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Nice Girl Naughty Edits

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About the Book

My life is no longer my own. Now, it belongs to *them*….

I had a stalker. Three of them, actually.
They'd been watching me from the shadows for years. And when the time was right, they seduced me with lies. Lured me into thinking they were good men.

They aren't.
Good men wouldn't have blackmailed me into being their captive. But they have, and they'll do anything to get revenge against my family, even if it destroys me.

What they don't realize is that I know the truth.
They're obsessed with me. Want to claim me. Own me—body and soul.
Most of all, I see them.
Damien's cruelty, Rome's anger, the pain behind Liam's scars…they call to me. Make me want things they can never give me.
Like their hearts.

I know our time together will soon end. I should be scared of what will happen to me once their revenge is complete. But truthfully?

The only thing that scares me is how willing I am to give these men *everything* they want…

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50. EPILOGUE

Rome

Thank You!

About the Author

More Books from Eva Marks

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Dedication

To anyone who wondered how three men can "make it fit".

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A Note From The Author

Under the Bed is a steamy, taboo romance, containing explicit, disturbing, and graphic scenes and kinks intended for mature audiences only.
Kaleb Leo Blackwood is not a model citizen, and that's an understatement. He's a masked, mostly emotionless and ruthless man. He kills people without losing sleep over it.
He never cared about anything or anyone.
Other than his stepsister.
Who he does love. And does care for.
That has to count for something, right?
So if you ever wandered how Michael Myers and Laurie Strode story would look like if they were stepsiblings instead of blood related, how their story would go if he ever caught her…
Under the Bed is it.
Full List of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings and Kinks.
Mask wearing MMC
Serial killer
Mentions of psychiatric hospital
Graphic murder scenes (not too gory, though)
Who did this to you?
Size difference

Pitch black, mostly emotionless and kind of irredeemable MMC—Not everyone he kills are bad people
Knife and blood play
Spitting
Both FMC & MMC untouched
He moans
Stepsiblings
Dubcon
Noncon
CNC
Psychology clinical practice sessions gone wrong
Physically and emotionally abusive parents
Breeding kink
Bondage
Drugging of the FMC by the MMC
The FMC grows slowly more and more unhinged
Some Halloween fun
Praise and degradation
Public sex
Punishments
Ass play
Underwear stealing
Somnophilia
Ice and fire play
Scarred FMC
Pierced P
Biting and marking
Child sexual assault, described in a flashback (not rape but her classmates did sexually abused her)
SPOILER AND PLAN B TRIGGER WARNING: Birth control tampering — the FMC wants to have babies with him, just not right now. He's a fugitive, you see, so she doesn't want to risk them running away and getting caught. Anyway, he believes he can take down anyone and anything and he's *really* into putting a baby inside her. So he makes her un-take the Plan B pill. *If you want to read the book but avoid that scene, you can skip chapter 22 and the first page of chapter 23.*
This is an M/F story

HEA guaranteed. No cheating.
Also, I would like to emphasize that I, the author, in no way condone the behavior, choices and actions of these characters, nor do they reflect my personal beliefs.

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Playlist

Fire Breather – Laurel

Doll Parts – Hole

Start a War – Klergy,Valerie Broussard

Monster – Chandler Leighton

I Kill Everything –DeathbyRomy, AWAY

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star– ITG Studios

Love into a Weapon – MadalenDuke

APHRODITE – Ethan Gander

BAD B!TCH – Dezi

Cravin' – Stileto, KendylePaige

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PROLOGUE

Damien

Twenty-three years ago

FOR MONTHS AND MONTHS on end, I've been stuck inside a never-ending nightmare.

One that finally came to an end this last weekend.

And I can't wait to share the good news with my two best friends.

"Rome," I call out to one of them, the first one I see at the school gates.

There's no mistaking his light brown hair that's buzzed close to his head. Even beneath the oversized hoodie and jeans swallowing up his small frame.

Even with a bunch of kids separating us on the way past the school gates, I see him. He doesn't hear me, though.

"Hey, Rome. Wait up," I keep calling him anyway.

I have to catch up to him before he disappears. I have to. I can't hold on to the good news a second longer. I couldn't talk to him throughout the weekend, couldn't get in touch with our other best friend, Liam Frost, either.

Rex and Harlow Palmer—or as I like to call them, my shithead foster parents—haven't been home from Friday evening until late night yesterday.

Without those assholes around, it should've been easier to go visit my friends. The guilt about bailing on my younger step-siblings, Jagger and Laurel, wouldn't hurt as much.

Except our foster parents were in the mood for punishing us before they went to spend the weekend at Rex's parents'.

This time, it wasn't as bad, though. They just locked us in. Disconnected the phones so we won't call social services.

Leaving a child under fourteen alone in Illinois is illegal. I'm the oldest and I'm eleven. I learned that from reading up about laws online. Started last year in the school's library. They would've been fucked if the police found us alone there.

That's what I've been able to pick up so far. I would've probably found a way to get us the fuck out of there, or get the couple arrested.

After this weekend, I won't need it. Not with the Palmers anyway. Hopefully with no other foster home ever.

When the monsters came back on Sunday night, they announced the best news. We've been saved.

"Hey, Rome!"

He's about to go past the wrought iron gates. Kids around and between us talk and laugh and yell, but I finally realize this isn't why he can't hear me.

He's focused on something else. On ignoring his hunger, no doubt. My guess, by the way my shouts go up and over his head? A full weekend of it.

He probably couldn't escape to Liam's like he does sometimes. He would've heard me otherwise.

Motherfuckers.

My gut twists. Shame burns through me. Look at me, so fucking happy when my friend is in pain. Unlike me, Rome and his sister won't be saved. They're stuck with their parents until they turn eighteen.

Watching him hurt wipes the smile off my face. Most days, I'm able to stick to my fake smile, at least. Not today.

Seeing Rome like this kills me. I hate this for him. I hate that he suffers so bad—that he focuses so hard on survival—that he tunes out the world. We've been friends since the first grade.

His parents' fridge is full to the brim, and there he is. Starved. Again.

Sure, our counselor asks him why his cheeks are hollowed. Why his collarbone sticks out. Why he's always furious.

He sticks to the same lie every time. The lie his dad demands he tell them.

Rome is a picky eater. Nothing our personal chef does is good enough for him.

That's why he goes to a public school instead of private. His family is wealthy, but his dad sent him here.

They're understaffed and don't have the budget to care about you. He laughed at Rome one day. He wasn't wrong.

No one goes to check up on their home.

His mom is okay with what his dad does.

Another monster.

They have a way to keep him in line. Joseph Langford threatens Rome that if he ever says anything, he'll starve Rome's three-year-old sister, Anne, worse than he does now. Maybe even to death.

Yeah. I'll keep the good news for later.

After I give him my sandwich, the last I've ever made at Rex's house. After I see my friend sort of smiling. His dark, harsh version of a smile, anyway.

Then Liam will help him get food for Anne. His parents are great like that. They don't lock him up. They do their best to make up for what happened to their kid last year.

I wedge myself between the other kids. They don't grunt or yell at me, even though I elbow my way past them. The opposite.

They want my attention.

"Hey, Damien! How are you?"

"Want to play ball after school?"

"No, he's not going to hang with you. He's coming over to my place. Right, Dame?"

The responses I give them are a shake of my head and, "Tomorrow. For sure, tomorrow."

I won't. I hardly ever go meet anyone other than my two best friends after school. But it's fine. No one cares, really. They like that I remember their names. The fake smile on my lips. The grin I perfected to reach my blue eyes.

They see the fake me, and they like it. They're drawn to it.

No one other than Rome and Liam know about my mask. That I had to learn to have one on and now I can't take it off.

Being passed around from one foster home to another is why I am the way I am. It's a survival mechanism. No matter what's going on in my head, I need everyone to like me.

Murderous on the inside, everyone's favorite person on the outside. Well, I wasn't always murderous.

Before the Palmers, I had decent foster parents. The other kids were okay too, I guess. I did my best to make them like me and it worked.

When I was passed to the Palmers, that's when shit got bad.

Over the last year, a little after Liam's *accident* and the shit I've been through at my foster home, I became vengeful. Hateful. No one would ever want to be around the real me.

Someone who dreams about revenge in the form of cutting up a particular married couple. Who has plans that would make it happen. Who smiles while he dreams of their hearts in his hands.

Blood everywhere.

Yeah, no one would want a friend like that. No one other than Liam and Rome.

Other than Jagger and Laurel, my foster siblings, who turn to me to protect them. I try. My God, I try. The healing wound on my left forearm is proof of that. It's a shallow cut. Wouldn't leave scars like those I have on my abdomen.

But I'll remember.

Three rows of kids separate Rome and me. I shrug the left strap of my old backpack off my shoulder as I push through them. Swing the bag to the front so I can fish out my PB & J sandwich and have it ready for him.

"Rome!" I try again.

Another kid beats me to him. Puts a hand on his shoulder. Offers him a tiny smile when Rome turns his head to face him.

Liam, with his unruly, wavy dark hair over his forehead, his amber eyes. He can sneak up on you without you ever noticing. The genius who skipped two classes.

I watch as Rome blinks when he realizes it's him. Something that resembles a smile appears on Rome's lips too. He can never stay angry when Liam's around.

"Black called you," he refers to me by my last name. Jerks his head in my direction.

I'm almost there, only one girl standing between me and them.

“Hey, Scar Face.” Ginne, the redhead asshole from my class, laughs as she points at Liam.

Her evil green eyes squint as they zone in on Liam. On the scar tissue that starts on his jaw, runs across his cheek, and ends below his earlobe.

“Why don’t you pull your hood over?” She laughs again. Fucking laughs at him. “Gross. No one wants to see that thing.”

Liam’s eyes widen. His fingers flex at this side, itching to cover himself up, if I had to guess. Rome and I swore him not to do that. Never hide his scars. There’s no shame in surviving a nightmare. Fucking none.

Ginnie doesn’t agree with us. She hasn’t ever since Liam was released from the hospital.

I’m never an asshole to anyone in school.

I am an asshole to her. Keep telling her to shut up about it. That I’ll ruin her social life.

The bitch just won’t listen.

One asshole coming right up, Ginnie.

Except Rome’s already there. Already serving her order.

My friend throws himself at her, his hand balled into a fist. His knuckles are red and raw from never having his gloves on when he takes his anger out on walls and punching bags.

And soon they’ll be red from destroying Ginnie.

His dark blue eyes are furious. Lips curled in a snarl.

Bam!

That first blow connects to Ginnie’s stomach. She doubles over, folding her arms over her stomach.

Stifling a laugh is hard. So I don’t. That bitch has earned it. I hope there’ll be more where that one came from.

“Dame has been nice to you this past year.” Rome looms over her, ignoring the growing crowd around us. He grabs her by the hair and yanks her head up to meet his furious gaze. “I’m *not* nice. Next time you even look at Liam, I’ll ruin you.”

Silence.

Boys don’t beat girls up around here.

Then again, not too many people I know are as overprotective as Rome. None of them have been gearing up to murder people when they’re older, like the three of us.

“You’re hurting me,” she grits out.

The crowd stays silent and at a safe distance from her and Rome. They won't come to help her. They won't run inside to call a teacher.

They're scared to mess with Rome and me.

Ginnie's on her own.

Serves her right.

This is a lesson that's been a long time coming.

"Do I look like I care?" Rome spits out, then turns to Liam. "L, you have something to add?"

By *add*, Rome means, *kick her*. He means, *I know I'll get detention for this plus a few days of no-food at home. But she bullied you, and it'll be worth it.*

Liam doesn't say a word. Slides a hand into the pocket of his jeans and takes his Zippo out.

"No." Ginnie starts crying big, fat tears.

My chuckle sounds evil. She has to have heard it since I've moved close to the three of them.

Rome nods at Liam. "Do it."

The lighter flicks open. Liam still hasn't had his growth spurt. He has to lift his arm until the gold Zippo reaches Ginnie's eyes. He keeps it on him always, a way to calm himself when his memories get the best of him. To remind himself what a badass he is, holding the thing that's partially responsible for his scar.

Flicking it open and shut like he owns it.

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

"D-don't, please."

Liam squints at Ginnie. His mouth pinches into a straight line. When he closes the lid on the Zippo, she screams at the abrupt sound. His expression doesn't change. He flicks it open again, rolling his finger over the wheel.

The blue-red flame flares before her eyes.

The rest happens fast. So fast.

He grabs a strand of her hair that's escaped from Rome's grip. Brings the fire to it.

Burns two inches of her hair before killing the flame between two fingers.

The big bully's face is as red as her hair as she sobs. Weeps harder when he slaps the top of her head to put out the fire.

Yes. That's what I'm talking about.

"Go, Liam," I say.

I bet Rex would scream louder than Ginnie when I take my revenge on him. Once the three of us are all grown up, I'll make him scream. Oh, man, will I fucking ever.

Rome's attention doesn't waver from Liam. Neither does mine. Not even when our friend takes a step back, crossing his arms over his chest. The shame has disappeared from his face.

He owns the fire. When he controls the fire, it doesn't control him.

This big dumb bully doesn't control him either.

"L, you done?" Rome watches him. "I can hold her down some more. As much as you need."

"I'm fine." Two words. That's it.

Those two words are the order Rome needs to release Ginnie from his grasp. She stumbles to the side, landing on me, of all people.

"Gross, Gin. All that snot. No one wants to see that." I push her to the ground, throwing her words back at her.

Too easily, she tumbles to the ground.

Reminds me of how Jagger tripped over himself when Rex shoved him on the kitchen floor a few months ago.

He won't be doing that anymore.

We were saved. Who could've believed that a tiny newborn would save Jagger, Laurel, and me from Rex and Harlow's abuse? Not me for sure.

The bell rings, cutting into my thoughts. Into my relief.

Since the show is over, everyone rushes inside.

Everyone but the three of us. Oh yeah, and the useless guard who's been snoring in his booth for the last ten minutes.

We don't ask each other if we're okay. It's a given we aren't.

"Are we adding her to the list?" I break the silence first, going for humor. I usually do.

"No." Liam pockets his Zippo. "She's an idiot. Not her fault."

I want to argue that she's an idiot who hurt our friend. Rome's icy blue eyes slice to mine, silencing me. It's the glare he gives me. It's the black circles under them, too. How hollow they look.

The fucking sandwich. My PB & J is in Rome's hand before he can tell me I should be the one eating it.

"I made two," I lie. "Eat up."

Normally, Rome demands to see the second sandwich. Today, he doesn't. Today, he chows half of it down. I was right back then. This shit has been

going on since lunch on Friday.

Rome's shaky fingers move to wrap what's left of the sandwich. "Anne."

His three-year-old sister.

"My parents prepared food for both of you in the fridge. Swing by after school." Liam pushes back a black strand of hair that fell into his eyes. It's back there. "You had something to say. That's why you called Rome over."

"Yes." Of course he'd know I meant to talk to both of them. There are no secrets between us. None. It's just that I didn't see him. "Never mind, though. We're gonna be late for class.

"Fuck class." Rome wipes the last of the crumbs off his mouth. "You're holding out good news on us, aren't you?"

The smile on my face is gone, and I shrug. I can't tell them. Rome's been suffering the whole weekend. Liam was just ridiculed for his scar.

Later.

"Rome, finish the sandwich." Liam nudges him. "I'll help you hide the food in your backpack for Anne. Swear."

"Okay. Talk, Damien." He unwraps the sandwich, tearing into it. "Before Mr. Hicks notices we're missing."

His cold eyes tell me he won't drop the subject. "I'm leaving the Palmers. Or more like, the Palmers are dropping us. The three of us."

Both of them gape at me.

Rome swallows the last bite of the sandwich. Coughs. "You're shitting me."

"What happened? Are they dying?" The corner of Liam's lips ticks to the side. A small smile before he shuffles through his backpack. "Should we take them off the list?"

"They're not getting off that easy. They're alive." The healed knife wounds in my abdomen burn the more I talk about the bastard. "Someone saved us. *She* saved us."

"She?" Liam stops, the brown notebook in his hand.

The notebook that holds the names of the people we're going to kill. Our revenge plans.

Justice.

One day, we'll be rich. One day, we'll have the money to hire people to help us. Spies to hunt them down. People to cover up our tracks. We're not sure how, but we will.

“Thought Rex doesn’t let the social worker see the scars and open wounds.” Rome’s brows lower. “You said he threatened to kill the three of you if you told.”

“He still does. *She* is Quinlan.” I stand a little taller. My heart gets this strange, warm and fuzzy feeling. Weird. “Rex’s new sister.”

“Isn’t he too old to have a baby sister?” Rome’s face twists. “What is he like? Twenty-three?”

“His dad’s new wife wanted a baby,” I repeat Rex’s words, the ones he said to Maeve. I overheard them one night. He actually sounded happy, the bastard. “Anyway, *she* is real. Quinlan is real. When Rex came back from his weekend there, he said we’re out. He wants Quinlan and her parents to visit him at his place and he doesn’t trust us little shits around her. So, bye, bye fuckers.”

Quinlan. Repeating her name, even in my own head, is like saying God’s name. I whispered it a million times last night. Each time, it tasted just as sweet.

I haven’t even seen the baby, and I love her. Thanks to her, Jagger, Laurel, and I are getting out of that hellhole.

She’ll be fine. The way Rex talked about her, he loves her. He’ll be nice to her.

To my savior.

I’ll keep an eye on her anyway. To protect her.

Because I can’t help it.

Hell, maybe I’ll use her as part of my revenge against Rex one of these days.

No.

Or maybe I will? I could. I won’t hurt her. I’ll give her everything, but Rex won’t have her and that will hurt him. He’ll suffer before I kill him.

Yes.

I snatch the notebook from Liam, shoving it in my backpack. I’ll add that part there over lunch break.

“You’re getting a new foster home and that’s it.” The look on Liam’s face is his thinking look. “What if they move you out of Chicago? Or to another part of town? What if the next one’s worse?”

“Worse than cutting me?” I smirk, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. “They’ll go onto the list. And about schools, don’t worry. I’ll find a way to stay. I’m not going anywhere.”

I’ll suck up to teachers, social care workers, whoever I need. I’ll convince them to keep me here.

I’m staying right here next to my brothers. Next to Jagger and Laurel.

For life.

And in the meantime, I’ll watch over Quinlan.

When she’s older, I’ll even thank her. I’ll spoil her.

Then I’ll get back at the Palmers through her.

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CHAPTER ONE

Quinlan

Twenty-three years later-present day

LATE EVENINGS ARE MY favorite time to hang out at Maeve's. The café where my older half-brother, Rex, works as the shift manager.

Not that I like it here, period, but he does. Says he needs to watch over his baby sister instead of having me hole up in my apartment doing who knows what.

Whatever. I compromise by visiting him in the evenings, when it's nicer.

Quieter.

The overhead lights cast a warm glow over the old oak wood floors and the round, mostly abandoned tables. Most of its clients work in the offices in Chicago's financial district. Most of them are already home. The café stays open late anyway.

Other than the blessed silence, Rex is nicer in the evenings. He isn't as impatient as he is when the place is packed. He's less than easy-going, true. That's who he is. He'll never be the friendly type, given our shared trauma.

Without the pressure of orders and broken mugs, though, he's better.

He's my only remaining sibling. He's grumpy and controlling as well and far from perfect.

Getting a B on my math exam? *“What the hell is this? You can do so much better, Quinlan.”*

Failing to call him and letting him know I’m okay after a night out during my college years? *“You’ll end up giving me a heart attack one of these days. Is that what you want? For me to die? You spend too much time away from your parents. You want them to be all alone, too?”*

Who is perfect, anyway? No one.

I hit send on another email as I bob my head to the music. “Doll Parts” by Hole starts playing over the speakers. I like that one.

Rex clears his throat, calling for my attention. Raising a questioning eyebrow. *How are you doing?*

I’m good. I return a small smile and give him a thumbs up.

I shouldn’t be complaining. I won’t. We’re family. Together forever, through thick and thin.

What’s left of us.

With that in mind, I’m back to my laptop. I’m a one-woman show, running my own business as a web designer. There are a few touch-ups I need to work on for one of my newer clients, as per his email. A project I have to rush since I’m tight on time.

I’m here today to give Rex the huge news I got today. When he’s less busy. When the next customers leave, and Wayne, the only server on this shift, doesn’t need help. Eliana, the barista, is busy making coffee, so I have to wait.

Back to my laptop, I go. Minutes pass, not sure how many. When I lift my head, to my surprise, I find the place has nearly emptied up.

The coffee machine huffs and puffs as Eliana cleans it, ready to turn it off for the day. They leave one open late at night. Wayne wipes the tables around me. And there he goes, the last patron stepping out the door.

Until another one stops by, Rex will have a minute for me.

“Hey.” I wave to him. “Could you come over for a sec?”

He slumps on the chair next to mine, throwing a blue dish towel over his shoulder. Runs a hand through his thick blond hair, his brown eyes tired.

“Hey, kid.”

At twenty-three, I’m no kid. Objectively speaking, I haven’t been for a while. For Rex, I’ll forever be one.

Maybe because he’s forty-six. Which isn’t old at all. My dad is sixty-eight and he stopped calling me *kid* years ago.

Truth be told, he hasn’t called me anything over the past few weeks. Maybe months.

That’s beside the point. Rex is here, and if he insists on calling me kid, it’s fine. I like it less when he treats me like one. I let him do it, regardless. I feel bad for him. Guilty, even. For his constant pain and moods. For an accident I had a part in.

I do everything I can to ease his pain. Pay Mom and Dad’s bills. Go visit them in the suburbs when they don’t pick up the phone or skip their psychiatrist sessions. Rex doesn’t fight me on this.

We agreed that it would be better if I handled it since he can’t afford any of it and he can’t work on the drive over like I can.

Working myself to the bone shows. Black circles are a constant feature under my gray eyes. My sandy blonde hair lies in a messy bun on top of my head a lot, like today. My business takes up most of my time. I spend hours on end taking any job that’s been offered to me. Stick to impossible deadlines.

And it’s fine.

Developing websites is my passion. I had to speed up the process a little bit, taking courses since my junior year in high school. I graduated from college three years ago, at twenty. Opened my company a couple of months before that.

It helps my family, too, and I’m proud to be there for them. Just because my parents shut me out doesn’t mean they don’t appreciate what I’m doing for them. They love me. They’re also clinically depressed. It started eighteen years ago and it won’t let them go.

Never mind. Today is about hope.

“You said you had news when you came in?” His brown eyes that are so similar to our dad’s drill through mine. Questioning. Always questioning and skeptical.

“Yes.” I straighten up in my seat and close my laptop. I smile, even though I’m not feeling it under his intense scrutiny and hint of doubt. I’ll smile, dammit. I have good news. “I landed a big contract today. Huge. As in I could have my own apartment soon. In the next three years even, and be able to provide better treatments to Mom and Dad. That’s how much they’re offering me a year, for the next five years.”

Rex’s inquisitive glare switches to wonder. “Five years?”

“At least.” I’m glad about the positive change in him. “They said they’ll sign me up indefinitely if they’re pleased.”

Rex sits up, his chest puffed. His lips are curled up. Pride brims from him and fills up the entire café.

“I’m so proud of you.” The chair he’s been sitting on makes a scraping sound as he stands up. He grabs me by the shoulders, yanks me up, and folds me into his arms. “Congratulations. Life will be easier for you. You could hire someone to help with your responsibilities. Maybe help me retire earlier. Good job, kid.”

He’s never like this, and my heart beats louder for it. My emotions are all over the place. So much so that I ignore his retirement comment. I’m happy that he’s happy, that’s it.

“Hey, hey.” I wrangle from his hold, looking at this tall man from my five-two. “I’m only starting. And I won’t outsource taking care of Mom and Dad. I love them.”

“I know you do.” Rex smooths down the sleeves of my pleated charcoal sweater, then steps back. “It’s time you start living. Meet a boy, bring him over for me to interrogate. Move to the suburbs next to Dad. Get out of the city, you know? I should’ve never let you come here.”

“Let me?” His words slash into the cloud of happiness. “I’m an adult, Rex. I’m allowed to have my own life. Live around people my age.” Never mind that I have half a friend after Rex’s isolated me from the world. I deserve this. To live outside the feeling of constant, agonizing guilt. Even if it costs me to do this. “I visit Mom and Dad. They have everything and see their shrinks twice a week. I hired a taxi for that. A huge portion of my income. You’re being unfair.”

Rex frowns. “This isn’t what I meant. Family’s important, and anyone can hurt you here. You shouldn’t be living in the city by yourself.”

“What’s wrong with the city?” Wayne throws at him. Despite us whispering this last part, he must’ve heard.

“This isn’t a place to raise a family.” Rex narrows his gaze at him at our side. As a new wave of anger surges within him, a strange emotion passes across his face that I can’t quite place. “Away from her parents. It would be in everyone’s best interest that she moves back there.”

Wayne replies with a clipped “Okay.”

I turn to see if he’s okay. His head is bowed as he collects used stirrers and empty sugar packs. Removing himself from Rex’s impending tirade.

I'd have done the same.

On an impulse, my hand flies to the heart tattoo I have under my left eye. I keep wondering *what if* as my fingers caress the spot over and over.

What if Blake wouldn't have drowned? What if I had saved him? Would Rex be less angry at the world?

Possibly.

Our family has been dealt some really shitty cards. Rex copes through anger. I cope through working myself to death.

"Anyway." Another forced smile to appease the bristling Rex.

"Yes, anyway." Rex's harsh expression thaws as I move my free hand to his shoulder.

His muscles are less strained beneath the black T-shirt with Maeve's red logo at the top left. Good. Then his eyes zoom in on my other hand and the tattoo I'm fingering.

He frowns. I drop my hand from my face in an instant.

"You're right," I reassure him. "This is a great thing for our family."

"I'm glad you dropped by." Rex puts more distance between us, wiping his hands on his jeans. "I'm always here for you. What's the name of the company you signed up with? Do I know them?"

"Could be. BLF Capital."

Rex blinks a couple of times before his eyes widen.

Same as mine did when I received the email. BLF Capital offered me the job of my dreams when I hadn't even applied.

Last week, when I saw the wanted ad, I craved this position. Wanted to sink my teeth into it. Email them, convince them I'm the best and most competent person for the job.

Then my logical side won over. Never in a million years did I think a multi-billion financial company would take a chance on me.

Quinlan's Designs is relatively new. Nothing like those big companies that have years of experience and an impressive portfolio. So I preferred focusing on my clients rather than wasting my time on applying for a job I would never be hired to do.

BLF Capital found me still.

"Incredible, right?" The job offer email is still fresh in my mind. I hop on my toes as excitement takes over. "Jefferson Bell, head of HR, reached out to me this morning. Said he got references and wouldn't take no for an answer. That the heads of the company want to meet me. The owners are

anonymous, but the three VPs are just as important. I'll see them and start in a week. A week, can you believe it?"

Apparently, the owners won't see anyone unless they absolutely have to. Kind of weird when buying, managing, then selling companies is based on trust rather than money.

I stow away the strange feeling. How they handle their company is none of my business. The company itself is well-known. There's nothing they can do to me while I work from home.

I'm just a freelancer hired to work for them.

Everything will be great. Stressful but great. So great.

"That's amazing." Rex shares my enthusiasm with another awkward bear hug. He smells of coffee and sweat, two scents I've smelled on him my entire life. He pulls back, his expression resolute. "I gotta stay until we close. Stay until midnight so I can walk you home. You're not good to us dead."

Maeve, the owner, insists they close at midnight. There aren't that many customers after seven. Almost none at all. Still, she insists.

"I'd rather get going." My laptop goes into my shoulder bag. He has to learn that he can't boss me around forever. "Got a lot of projects to rush through. I have to focus. Have to wrap everything up before I start with BLF."

"So responsible. I'm proud of you, Quinlan. Call me when you get home?" The moment I quirk an eyebrow, he chuckles. "You're not in college anymore. Call me when you can. Don't forget to call Dad's psychiatrist to check on his progress."

"I will." I throw the strap of my bag over my shoulder and leave into the night.

This job is only the beginning. A bright future lies ahead of me.

No more struggles. No more pain.

There's a light at the end of the tunnel, and I'm not walking toward it.

I'm running.

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CHAPTER TWO

Quinlan

CHILLS CREEP UP MY spine on my walk home.

This isn't the end of winter weather. Not the soft wind that licks at my exposed nape.

This is deeper than that.

I'm being watched. Followed.

The feeling is familiar, though it's never been as intense.

Unease has caused my skin to prickle over the years. More so after I moved to the city. When I'd hang around at Maeve's. Went grocery shopping. Even at home.

Whenever I looked around, I saw nothing. Everyone's been minding their own business. No neighbor peeked from their window into my apartment.

No sleep and all coffee made Quinlan a dull girl, I figured. I'd laugh at how silly I was being. How I'd freak out over nothing.

This, I can't laugh it off. Can't shake it off.

It only gets worse, more demanding.

Heaviness in the pit of my stomach. A sharp burning sensation at my back. My pulse skyrockets.

Something is wrong. So wrong.

My eyes narrow at the man in a dark suit and slumped shoulders who heads my way. His head is bowed while he talks on his phone. He's not watching me.

The woman with a high, auburn ponytail comes up behind him. She jogs on the sidewalk, sidestepping us both, disappearing behind me. She isn't it, either.

There's no monster at my back, otherwise the people at my front would've warned me.

Right?

Right.

A look behind my back and I breathe easier. The street is empty, besides the woman who sprints, disappearing in the distance.

I'm fine. It's a good neighborhood. A few more blocks and I'll be home.

Five more minutes go on like this. Of me hyping myself. Convincing myself I'm perfectly safe here.

And failing.

It should've helped by now. My wild imagination should've calmed its fucking tits. This isn't like me, this hugging my middle. This hurried pace.

Nothing ever scares me anymore. I'm a strong, independent woman. I've been living on my own and providing for myself for the last three years. Have recently signed a major contract with a renowned company.

Me. *I* did it.

No one gets to scare me. No one has the right to back me into a corner.

Other than Rex. But he's harmless. He's a wounded beast, my older half-brother. His mom died when he was a teenager, then our—

I shake my head. Another moment that I think about my younger brother, and I'll cry.

No time for that. The present moment, that's what I need to focus on. On this horrible, ominous feeling of being watched. Of being the sole focus of a stranger's undivided, bone-chilling attention.

A soft tapping sound of shoes walking the pavement reaches behind me.

Oh, shit. Now I *know* I'm not crazy.

Whoever it is, they're done hiding. They're here.

Screw them.

Screw them for messing with my perfectly perfect day. Screw them for fucking with me. Rex is the only one who's allowed to do that. He's family. He has mitigating circumstances. Like our dead brother and how I failed to save him eighteen years ago.

The person behind me isn't Rex.

He's a rude, stalking asshole, and I'm going to tell him exactly that.

I come to a full stop. Put my hands on my hips. Roll my shoulders back.

On the outside, I might look tired and overworked. My soul isn't exhausted, though. It's ready to fight. Ready tell whoever this is they can go suck a cock.

I'm not a victim.

Not waiting a second longer, I spin on my heel. I'm already glowering at whoever I might find there, stalking me. Ready to kick them in the nuts in case they get too close.

I will, I most absolutely—

What the hell?

The man in the charcoal gray suit who's prowling toward me isn't a creep. Doesn't wield a knife or a cloth with chloroform clutched in his fist.

He's simply there. Staring at me with the most beautiful sapphire blue eyes I've ever seen. Even in the dark, I can tell they glow.

He narrows them, curious and intense, as he starts walking in my direction. I have to look up to keep gazing at him as he invades my personal space. This tall man who's about six-foot-three.

Damn him, he's even more beautiful up close. More dangerous.

His brown hair is cut close on the sides, longer and organized on top. His jaw is all sharp edges. His cheeks are a work of highlights and shadows beneath a dark scruff.

And his mouth. It's the most dangerous part of him. The man smirks, and yet there's nothing reassuring about it. The way his lips curve. He's wicked. Devious.

Then they move. "Can I help you?"

Only when he talks do I realize he's stopped right in front of me. That I'm still scowling and my hands are pinned to my waist. That the heat of his body bleeds into mine.

The fragrance of his cologne carries to me. It smells expensive, like his suit. The hint of spice is enough to make me lose my resolve.

As if he counted on it to make me weak for him.

Asshole.

"I asked…" His hand rises between us, fingers long and manly. Warm, I notice, when he brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear. His touch is calculated. Cold. A contrast to the supposedly kind gesture. "Can I help you?"

He touches me as if he knows me. As if he's familiar with my body, or at least wanted to.

A predator. That's what he is. His thousand-dollar suit, expensive haircut and smooth voice are a veneer. A trap. And I, for whatever reason, am his prey.

I'm a strong, independent woman. I am.

I wrap my hand around his wrist, needing to yank his hand away from my face.

Big mistake.

A pang of electricity shoots through me from where our bodies are connected. I gasp as it burns me down to my core.

We don't move, and I feel his pulse beneath my fingertips. Strong. Commanding.

Delicious.

I have to bite down the inner part of my bottom lip to stifle a groan.

"Darling?" His voice jolts me back to the present moment.

He's been stalking me.

"I'm not your darling." I remove his hand from my face. Take a step back, to a place where air seeps into my lungs. Where my brain can function. "I'm not your anything." My low hiss doesn't deter him.

He inches toward me, crowding my space again.

This isn't how I'm going to die. I refuse to be hypnotized by a gorgeous man, a predator. I refuse to leave my family because this stalker is so good at his mind games.

"Stay back." I ball my hands into fists, lifting them between us, pushing at his rock-hard chest. "I took self-defense classes in college. Leave me alone."

"Or else?" He cocks a dark eyebrow at me. "You'll punch me for walking down the street? I had no idea strolling was a punishable offense."

He simply did that. Walk down the street. He didn't do anything other than ask if he could help me. He also did more. He touched me in a way my one and only boyfriend from junior high ever touched me. And even then, it never felt like this.

I shouldn't like this.

I'm tormented over this.

The man gets off on my inner war. His sapphire blue eyes twinkle.

Then, ever-so-slowly, his smirk transforms into a soft smile.

A fake one.

He’s trying to prove that he’s harmless. Trying to make me fall for it.

Why?

The empty street is the perfect setup for him to do whatever he wants with me. My self-defense classes would be worthless against a man his size.

In two seconds flat, he could drag me into the nearest alley, rape and kill me. He’d put his large hand over my mouth, silence my screams. I could kick him in the balls all I want, nothing would work.

So why does he care about disarming me when he’s just standing there?

At my frown, his sexy smirk returns.

Sexy? It was wicked a second ago. It was, but his fingers are back on my cheek. His thumb lights the nerve endings on my skin with every possessive stroke.

“And I should know.” His voice sounds velvety and deep.

“Know what?” I whisper-growl, pissed mostly at myself.

Rex would have a field day if he ever found out about this. That I’m leaning in to a stranger’s touch. Standing here, still as a statue, instead of hightailing it home.

“What a punishable offense is.” The man slides his hand lower. His fingers are at my chin, tipping my face up. Silencing me with one commanding gesture. “Since I’m a lawyer. It’s my job to know that.”

A short, incredulous laugh bursts out of me.

Of course, lawyers can do terrible, terrible things. They’re human just like the rest of us. But would anyone announce he’s a lawyer before he’s going to rape and murder a woman? Sounds ridiculous.

I laugh harder.

“What?” The question isn’t an indignant one. His eyes glint. He’s as amused as I am. “What’s so funny?”

“You won’t kill me,” I blurt out, then clasp a hand over my mouth.

His smirk widens. “No, darling, I won’t.”

He didn’t say *I won’t do any other things*. Didn’t ask why I thought the worst of him.

He’s just amused, that’s all. And harmless.

As panty melting as this man is, I can’t stay here and chat.

In a few weeks—depending on how demanding the BLF gig turns out to be—I might meet him again. I’d smile and ask him what he was doing out here, if he lives anywhere nearby.

Hopefully, he'd call me darling again. Since he's not a murderer, I think I might like it.

"Okay, then, since murdering me is off the table." Reluctantly, I pull away from him. "I'll get going. Bye."

Neither of us moves.

"I have work to do," I remind myself. Out loud.

"What do you do for a living?" The question is quiet, meant only for me.

"Web designer." The answer flows from me. He's safe. He won't use it against me. And I… I kind of want to tell him. "I have my own business, so I don't have time for this. So…got to go. See you around."

Something flashes across his features, wiping off the humor in his eyes. He's changing in front of me, his expression shifting. Hard lines and sharp edges all over, as if he'd never smiled at me. Ticking jaw and serious eyes.

I'm frozen in place and he's the only one with the power to free me. It's pathetic to ask for his permission. I do that anyway. "You're supposed to say something like I'll be seeing you, stranger."

"It's late," he says instead. "Let me walk you home."

Let me walk you home.

Five words. Five seemingly harmless words.

Except they're spoken from his mouth. His lips.

He's asking me to walk me home. Not demanding. In a bossy sort of way, true, but still. He gives me an out.

I could let him walk me home. What's the worst that could happen? He'll see where I live? And do what with it? He can't come inside the building without a code. He can't break into my apartment without a key.

No one can. There hasn't been a break-in for the past three years I've rented my apartment there. Even Rex approved of me living in The West Loop neighborhood exactly for that reason. It's safe.

I should just say yes and start walking. Instead, I'm here, lingering. Cocking my head to the side, offering the stranger a teasing smile.

"You care about my safety?"

What the hell's wrong with me?

The man doesn't think there's anything wrong. His gaze is just as curious. Just as intense. "Yes. I do."

"You're a terrible liar." My nervous giggle should embarrass me. It only draws the stranger closer. "You don't care. You just want to find out where I live, stalker."

His face is stony. Reminds me of a sculpture.

No man should be this beautiful. No one.

“Is that a yes?”

My stomach ties up in knots. It doesn’t seem like he’d let this go. I don’t want him to let this go.

“Yes.” I swallow around the lump in my throat. Around the heavy meaning behind my answer. “It’s a yes.”

The man’s lips twitch. Then the smirk and twinkle are back. His mouth opens to say something.

If he asked me to go home with him right now, I would.

I can’t.

“This way.” I turn and start heading in the direction of my home.

The man falls into step next to me. A minute or two of easy silence stretches between us as we walk past cute storefronts, crossing over into my neighborhood.

“You always attack strangers on the street?” His light tone is full of suggestions. Sexy ones.

I twist my head up to him. Nothing scary or predatory about him now. The intensity from before could’ve been a figment of my imagination for all I know. Maybe it was.

We cross the road. “Only creeps who call me darling.”

“So, let me get this straight.” He casually rests his hand on my lower back and pulls me toward him, steering me away from a delivery guy who almost runs into me. “*You* stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. *You* turned my way. Scoffed at me. You had that cute hands-on-your-hips thing going on. All I did was ask you what’s wrong. How am I the creep here?”

His hand fits nicely on the curve of my back. So nicely that I don’t bother recoiling from his touch once the threat of the delivery guy has cleared.

“Yes. You’ve been following me,” I taunt him. I interrogate him. Doesn’t matter how hot he is. He’s still basically a stranger. “I heard you walking behind me. That’s why I stopped.”

“I wasn’t following you.” I feel his heated gaze on my skin. When I look up, I see him staring. “I was on my way home.”

It’s hard to believe a man wearing such expensive clothes would *walk* home. He has to have a car. Maybe even a driver.

Questioning his honesty would be the right thing to do.

Then there's his hand on my back. The warmth of it turns me into a foolish, wanting girl.

"Where's home?" My voice is hoarse. *Snap the fuck out of it*. I give myself a mental shake, clearing my throat.

His lips tick higher at the sound. At my obvious embarrassment. Great, now my cheeks are blazing. Now he's closer, his hand sliding to my waist.

"A few blocks up the road." He jerks his chin in that direction. No address. No neighborhood.

"Oh, *there*." I manage a smile. A teasing response. "Nothing vague about *there*."

"Curious little thing." His eyes darken.

He called me… *Sigh*. Did he really have to do it in *that* voice?

A voice I'm falling for. I can't stop looking at him. I'm not worried I might stumble on another person or bust my foot on a fire hydrant. This man won't let anything happen to me.

Anything other than himself. *He*'s happened to me.

His fingers apply the slightest pressure on my skin. His eyes are evil again.

How does he do that?

"I am." I'm back to fishing for information. He's a predator, I can't afford to forget that. "I thought maybe I could walk *you* home."

"You care about my safety?" he repeats my question to me.

Flirting. That's what he does. He isn't evading. He…flirts. Another green flag.

Compared to his thousand red ones.

"Exactly." Feeling more comfortable, I lift my fists to my chest. Take two, three punches in the air. "Anyone comes anywhere near you, I'll kick their butts."

At that, mystery man lets out a low laugh. "You'd do that for me?"

"Yes."

He makes a low voice at the back of his throat. It's on the tip of my tongue to continue our back and forth. Dare him to let me walk him home and fight off anyone who'd come near him.

"Oh." My eyebrows furl. How disappointing. We've made it to my apartment building. "This is me."

"Yes, it is."

Ice latches itself around my heart, freezing me down to my bone.

Or it could be the fact that the man's hand no longer warms the small of my back. He's returned it to his side, and I'm cold. It's physical.

I'm not worried about his strange statement, like he knew I lived here.

He won't do anything to hurt me. He could've and he hasn't.

"Well, then," he says.

I turn to face him. Is it possible to get used to a predator? To be disarmed this easily? If it is, this man is a pro at it.

I want him to come home with me.

Stupid. And impossible. There's no time for this. Not even for a goodnight kiss. A relationship, a date, a one-night stand, they're off the table.

There's a lot riding on the projects I have yet to finish. On the major contract with BLF Capital.

My parents' medical bills and insurance. My financial security. A little extra for Rex if he ever got laid off.

It's irresponsible to risk any of it for him. For this beautiful, mysterious, incredibly hot man.

Unless he insists.

He doesn't. *Well, then*, hanging in the air between us. He doesn't say another word.

"You're going, right?" My heart shouldn't pinch at this. It does, anyway.

"I am." His fingers curl around the side of my neck. He backs me up into a dark corner, pushing me to the space where my building's front door and the building itself meet.

An onlooker could think the stranger and I are lovers. A man in a suit towering over a woman with her lips parted. He's grabbing her neck as if he has the right to. His face is angled so low that they almost kiss.

To me, it feels like I'm drowning. Suffocating. Being forced to stare into two precious sapphires that have lost all their spark. Only cruelty remains in them. Only threats to do the worst things to me.

I don't hate it. I'm fucked in the head to want this. To agree to this. I really am.

"Doesn't look like you're going," I mumble, pressing both hands to his firm chest. I need to pull him close. I need him to go away. "Having second thoughts? Already?"

"Second thoughts?"

“Uh…” Me and my stupid mouth. Ugh. I should’ve just told him to *leave*. Instead, here I am. Flirting. Awkwardly so. “About me being your bodyguard.”

“That.” His lips pinch into a fine line while his eyes roam over every available inch on my face. The man’s gaze skates lower to my collarbone, my heaving breasts. Then he drags them up to meet my gaze. “I appreciate the offer, darling, but I’m good. If I want anyone dead, I’m capable of getting the job done myself.”

“Ha!” I bark out a nervous laugh. He’s kidding, right? It’s a part of our banter. “Good one. You’re funny.”

“We’ll find that out soon enough,” he whispers, his voice harsh. Barely audible.

I gulp. His grip around my neck tightens, as if he’s trying to memorize that part of me.

He’s kidding, I have to remind myself of that. He’s a funny man with a dark side.

He won’t kill anyone, least of all me.

But he’ll touch me. He is touching me. Hard muscles pressed to my soft curves. He’s even harder between his legs, and I can’t breathe with how much I want him.

His forehead is a hair’s breadth from mine.

This is it. Work is meaningless. Life is an inconsequential series of events.

There’s only him and his hands pressing my jaw. Angling my head to the side. And—

“Do you like cronuts?” It’s either this question or I let him kiss me.

I have no time for kissing a man.

“Do I what?” Amused again. His thumb is on my bottom lip, tugging it down.

“Cronuts, you know? The love child of croissant and a donut,” I’m blabbering. The man and his slow smirk do that to me. I also have to get these words out, or I’ll give in to him. I’m so close. “A fluffy donut. Delicious.”

“Can’t say I’ve tried one. I’m not big on sweets. Unless…” His thumb scorches my tongue as he dips it into my mouth. He doesn’t have to say unless what. Unless it’s me. “Why do you ask?”

“There’s a place.” I’m breathless as he wets my lips with my own saliva. “A really great, awesome place.” I sigh, to my shame, and the man’s eyes turn to hot coals. “Where they serve them. We could go, once my schedule frees up.”

“We could?” he coaxes, his thumb running along my lips rendering me stupid. Totally, completely stupid. “You’d go with a stalking creep?”

“My half-brother is the manager there. If you misbehave, he can—”

The stranger’s face changes into something unrecognizable. Neither amused nor intense.

Furious.

His molars gnash so hard I can hear it. Nostrils flare.

He’s mad. Real mad. His anger is red paint—it’s *blood*—and it’s everywhere. I can practically taste metal on my tongue. Feel the air vibrating around us.

“Hey, are you okay?” I reach up to stroke his cheek. He winces, but doesn’t pull back. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, darling. You could never.”

The man releases me into the wall. Takes one, two, three steps back.

My knees are weak. I don’t let it show. Don’t give any sign that he’s hurt me. I straighten my back and revert to the woman I was a few minutes ago.

Instead of pouting, I glower at him. “Can you at least tell me what happened?”

“No.” He tugs on the knot of his tie, readjusting it, then running a hand along his jaw. Twisting his features into a more effable expression. To smirking at me. To his mask. “Not yet. I will, though. Soon. I’ll see you around, neighbor.”

I don’t like people being cryptic. Or quiet. I hate loaded silences so bad. I’ve had enough of those for a lifetime.

“If you plan on keeping up this stalking act, don’t you think you at least owe me your name?”

A huff of a laugh escapes him. This one doesn’t sound fake. “I do.”

“Well?”

Just because he agrees with me, doesn’t mean I’ll get my answer, apparently.

Sapphire Eyes turns from me, slipping into the night.

Taking his name and a few of my heartbeats with him.

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CHAPTER THREE

Damien

I'M OUT OF QUINLAN'S line of sight. Hidden in the shadows. Choosing a dark alleyway instead of going straight home.

Far, far, far away from my heart.

My cock throbs in my slacks. My chest feels tight.

Despite her mentioning her motherfucking half-brother, I'm still hard for her. I ache for her.

She's my everything. She's more than that. I've had my hands on her, finally. I claimed her.

She's mine.

I've kept my distance over the past five years. Let our private investigators stalk her and deliver her photos to me. To Rome and Liam. Watched her through the camera I installed in her bathroom instead of coming near her myself.

No more driving up to her house. No more stalking her where she went. My feelings shifted as soon as she turned eighteen. I wanted to touch her. To have her.

I would've, and it was a risk.

It was too early for her to meet me. For me to kidnap her.

The three of us needed more money, more influence. More time to execute our revenge plan.

We have it now.

And I. Had. Her. Her pulse raged beneath my fingertips. Her back arched to me when I locked her between the wall and my body.

These few stolen minutes with her were all it took for me to lose it.

Images of her on her knees. Her nails digging into my thighs. Lips wrapped around my cock. Her throat gagging around me.

Quinlan would definitely use those fists on me then.

She'd punch me and take it. She could even punch me when I made her come. When I'd bury myself in her pussy. I'd welcome it.

I'd keep fucking her still.

Her self-defense classes would amount to nothing against me. Against us.

A smirk curves my lips up. This isn't a part of the plan, fucking her.

The plan has been to mess with her head. The three of us were supposed to bump into her. Make her question her sanity before her meeting at BLF. Before we took her.

Rex would freak out. Stealing her from him would be even worse. It'd destroy him.

Then we'd rub it in his ugly face. Pretend like we're violating her.

Quinlan passed between us would be the last thing he'd see before I put an end to his miserable existence.

I've wanted to have her. Fuck yes, I have. Nights of jacking off to the feed from her shower are proof of that.

But up until now, I haven't thought about doing it without caring whether she consented or not.

And I'm not the only one. I've noticed the way Liam and Rome stroke her pictures. How they look at her with as much emotion as I do.

Twisted emotion, sure. Emotion nonetheless.

We weren't supposed to fall for her. I highly doubt she'll fall for us after everything.

Oh, who cares. I'll worry about that later.

I'm too worked up to think of anything other than her body wrapped around me.

She yelled at me. Raged when I didn't give her my name.

She wanted me. Even if it was for a moment.

My smirk grows wider the closer I get to where I parked my SUV. The right thing to do would be to drive straight home. Get back to the unanswered calls and texts that must be blowing up my phone.

I won't go home. I will, however, check my phone.

Of course. Two missed calls from Liam, three from Rome.

There are two texts in the group chat, too.

Rome: *Where are you, Damien?*

Rome: *You're being a prick. Fucking answer.*

Aww. His way of telling me he's worried.

Liam: *It'll be too bad if you died. Twenty-three years of planning washed down the drain. Such a fucking shame.*

I shake my head, moving through the streets. Through the night.

As much as I hated pulling away from Quinlan, I'm grateful for the distance.

She can't have the upper hand.

Can't find out she has my heart.

Not yet.

It'll ruin the plan if she realizes how deep my obsession for her runs.

Down to my heart. To my soul. To my marrow.

Her birth meant Jagger, Laurel and I got to slip out of Rex's claws. It ended up with us being taken by better families. Much.

She won't make a good, reliable captive if she knows any of it. If she learns what she means to me.

I don't answer my friends, slipping the phone into my pocket as I'm picking up the pace on my way to my car.

Resisting the urge to double back and be a miserable, vulnerable asshole around her is a hardship. I do it anyway. She'll demand my name then, and I can't give it to her. Rex can't know I'm coming for him.

We've managed to live without having our names leaked to the press as the owners of BLF Capital for years. We're *just* the VPs, high-ranking managers no one cares about. Only Tatum, our secretary, is in on our secret. She signed an NDA and is loyal to her core. It doesn't hurt that we told her we'll make her disappear in case she fails.

But if I told Quinlan my name, if Rex hears I sniff around his half-sister before I'll have her as leverage, he'll alert his cop buddies. The ones he met in the academy before they threw his ass out, years ago.

They'll lock me up, and Rome and Liam won't let me go down alone. They'll say they planned on taking her too.

That'll be it.

No avenging Rome by killing his parents. His dad who's been starving him for years. His mom who hadn't peeped a word to put a stop to this.

No killing Liam’s old monster of a babysitter.

Rex motherfucking Palmer will be a free man. I already lost his bitch ex-wife to a car accident.

A drunk driver robbed me of the pleasure of doing it by myself. I got my revenge on him, though. He accepted my offer to represent him pro bono. And I didn’t feel bad for failing at my job and throwing the case.

Didn’t feel anything when I visited Harlow Palmer’s grave the night of the funeral. When I spat on it. When Rome bashed the gravestone with a sledgehammer. When Liam burned the flowers her mother left her there.

Fun times.

But I digress.

Quinlan has to remain in the dark about my identity. Rome and Liam will visit her throughout the week. They’ll mess with her.

I should’ve told them I was going to her today. That I had to be first.

Except I couldn’t fight the impulse. I couldn’t think straight.

I unlock my black Mercedes SUV with one click on the fob. Climb inside. The moment the driver door closes and I’m alone in my car, I let out a laugh. A low, rugged one.

A frustrated one. I’m hard. Desperate for a release after today.

Driving when I’m like this is reckless.

That, and I’m an impatient fucker. Behind tinted glass in a mostly empty street, I unbuckle my belt. The sound of a zipper rolling is the only one in the silent car.

My cock throbs in my fist, and I give it one painful tug. I groan, frustrated at how unsatisfying it is.

I could come from the thought of Quinlan alone any day of the week. Could replay what happened today. Cornering her. Watching my little prey fight me while I take her. While I give her all of me. The sick and twisted parts of me. The loving, dedicated parts.

I’ll lay my obsession at her feet.

The real me.

Could, and won’t. I have videos of her saved on my phone. Every second she’s spent in her shower is recorded and saved on my phone.

Naked. Unsuspecting. Mine.

Ours.

My favorite is the one I have of her from last summer. The steam didn’t fog up the glass of her shower or the camera’s lens. Her curves, the water

sliding down her body… How she touched herself.

It’s all there. This is the one video I jack off to the most.

I’m lonely. I need her. Haven’t had or wanted another woman for *years*. No one else exists.

Quinlan’s videos are the air I breathe. What helps tame the beast until I finally have her.

And I just touched her.

If I can’t make her come on my tongue, watching her shower will have to do.

This video. This fucking video.

Quinlan tugs on her hairband, freeing thick locks upon locks of sandy blonde hair. Tips her head up, raking her fingers through her hair that cascades over her shoulders.

From this angle, I see her parted lips. The hint of a smile.

Hand in my boxers, I start stroking myself. Up and down. Root to tip. That’s where those pouty pink lips will go, stretching around my girth.

Next, she shucks off the clothes she slept in. Neon yellow tank and white sleep shorts.

Without her panties on, she’s completely naked. Her pretty pussy is smooth. Her ass is round and so fucking delicious.

Biteable. I’ll leave my marks there. My belt. My teeth. My hands. Every time she’ll sit, she’ll be reminded of me. Of how good I made her feel.

Precum leaks from the tip of my cock as I drown in her. She’s graceful as she slides the glass door of the shower closed. Her feet pad along the black tiles, and she gasps when that first water stream hits her skin from the shower head above.

So. Fucking. Cute.

More than that. She’s hot. I can’t look away from her hard pink nipples through the clear glass. From the water drops cascading down her body.

Her fingers settle between her thighs. One hand splayed on the wall for balance.

There she is. My girl.

Ours, I remind myself again.

Yeah, no. Tonight, she’s mine. All goddamn mine.

“Fuck,” she sighs, her head bowing.

Her hair hides her face. Which is fine. I have every inch of her face ingrained into my mind.

And I get to hear her. Her moans. Her hushed curses.

She's a virgin, our Quinlan. Doesn't mean she's innocent. She knows what she wants. The way she rubs herself, the way she gets off. I make it just in time to come with her, to groan inside my car and shoot my load in my palm.

When I have her, it won't be fast. I'll stretch it for minutes that'll feel like hours. Deny her orgasms, if I'm in the mood. Make her come so hard she cries for me.

If she'll allow Liam and Rome to take her, they'll do the same.

Because that's the fucking point, right? The new one.

Take her. Fuck with her. Make her addicted to us despite herself.

I'm not sure why there's so much torture set in my plans for her. She's my savior.

I just fucked my hand in my car because of how much I need her. Came so hard I saw stars.

She's the only thing he *loves.*

Rex will be in agony, imagining all the ways my friends and I are violating his dearest half-sister.

I should be satisfied with that. I'm not.

All of her. That's what I want. That's what I'll have.

The revenge on its own isn't cutting it anymore.

I grab a tissue from the glove compartment, wipe my hand clean, and start the car. The wheels screech when I press on the gas and peel out to the road. I blend into traffic. Get lost between other cars and drive straight ahead.

I'm heading home.

Or… No.

There's one stop before I go home. Maeve's. Where I'll be reminded exactly why I can't kidnap Quinlan this fucking minute. Why I'll never deviate from our plan.

The bastard's in there. Rex moves around the café, cleaning the place up, helping Wayne, the brown-haired server.

Yeah, I know their names. Our private detectives were ordered to deliver us every single detail about our targets. Our job was to memorize them.

Rex shouts at the poor guy. I can't hear him, but his face contorts, triggering the worst memories of my life.

The scars on my abdomen come to life.

Strengthening my resolve.

We'll have our revenge. Then we'll have the girl.

We'll make her love us. I wasn't sure before. I am now.

She's a fiery little thing. A toy I already enjoyed playing with. A woman I'll gladly defile.

She'll fight us on it.

She might not approve of our revenge plan.

She won't have a choice in the matter.

We own her. I'll have the best time proving it to her.

My mouth ticks up to the side.

Can't fucking wait.

One week.

One.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Rome

FLICK. SNAP. FLICK. SNAP.

Liam's been at this for the past ten minutes. Playing with the lid of his gold Zippo without lighting it while we sit in our living room at home.

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

It doesn't bother me. Never has. The background noise and his silence have been a constant in my life for years. That's a part of who he is, meaning it's a part of me.

He needs it, meaning I need it.

While another person might've asked him to stop, I don't. I scroll through my emails, waiting for Damien's reply. As always, I'm completely unaffected by the flick and snapping sounds as I sit here, on the opposite sofa.

I watch him for a couple of seconds, running my hand over my light brown buzz cut. Giving him an opening. Waiting to see if he wants to talk.

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

No, it is. I turn my attention back to my work emails.

He'll talk when he's ready. He's nervous. Understandably so. Damien went AWOL. We'll start our rounds of visiting Quinlan this week.

Our plan is shaping into a real thing. After over twenty-three years of plotting.

The ideas we scribbled on a worn-out notebook. The late-night meetings. The stalking. The acquisitions we made on behalf of BLF Capital.

This is it.

We've been meticulous. Putting one brick on top of the other. Layers of cement gluing them together. Rain and shine and daily struggles.

I'm ready. So goddamn ready to use my fists. My muscles. My money.

We're going to wreak havoc. Draw blood.

My body hums at the prospect.

The gym in our building has been an outlet for all this pent-up, violent energy within me. Liam runs. He lifts weights. It can't be as relieving as kicking the shit out of a punching bag. Maybe he's nervous about killing people, as bad as they are.

My eyes slide up to him.

We both changed from our work suits, both wearing a pair of loose jeans and T-shirts. His is white, mine black. We didn't coordinate. It's just how it is after living together for the past five years. We sync.

His eyes, though, they're distant. Despite the way they glow in the soft light of the floor lamp, Liam's far away.

It's Damien he's worried over, not our plan. I see that the longer I stare. Damien disappearing is the only unknown in this equation.

He's never done that. Neither of us has. We're honest with each other. Committed. Transparent. Otherwise, we wouldn't have signed a contract to bind the three of us together. We wouldn't have conspired to end our tormentors without a deep level of trust.

"Remember the first day of BLF Capital?" I test the waters, checking if Liam's in the mood to talk.

Nothing.

I feel somewhat better regardless.

Our company. Ours.

We all share the burden of running our private equity company. That said, we all have different areas of responsibility, depending on our sets of expertise.

I'm in charge of the negotiations. Squeezing people until they're bled dry. I'm also the bad guy who'll threaten anyone who doesn't fall in line. We're the best at what we do, and that's turning a failing company into a successful one. Those who think we'll be silent shareholders and let them keep fucking up, are in for a rude awakening. By me.

Damien is the lawyer. He makes sure we haven't missed a single detail. We have a legal department, but Damien has an eye like no other. A clandestine brain and a sharp tongue. No one puts one over us, thanks to him. It doesn't hurt that he's a sweet talker. He can get anyone to sign *anything*.

Liam runs the research department. He's constantly on the hunt for companies that are out on their luck. Hacks into their servers. Builds an offer based on their reports with his team, leveraging the information to our advantage.

My trust fund—the one my late grandparents had set up for me—started this. I poured every cent I had into BLF Capital. We share the profits equally between the three of us.

The three of us deserve it.

Many people have that dream of success. Of becoming rich.

Many of them fail.

Not us.

We've stayed driven like no other since day one. Revenge is a powerful fuel.

And it's within our reach.

Unless Damien died and his murderer is reading his messages.

Highly unlikely. Damien's alive, I'm sure of it. He's up to something, and I have an idea what it is.

Except he should've talked to us first. Every second of our schedule is accounted for.

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

Liam switches his position so his long legs are sprawled on the sofa. His eyes are focused on the Chicago River outside.

Other billionaires at the ages of thirty-four and thirty-two probably don't have roommates. They don't live together with their best friends.

We do. It's more than a necessity. It's a choice. I don't love them in the romantic sense. That isn't the case for us. But we're each other's family.

We're brothers.

They won't ever ask why I come home with bloodied knuckles. Won't judge me when I lose my temper. Won't complain that the fridge and pantry are overstocked.

They don't think I'm damaged.

Will Quinlan? I've been wondering about that for years.

The woman in the pictures looked sweet. The girl she was while Damien stalked her sounded a little sad, a tad unhinged and compassionate to a fault.

She turned into a gorgeous woman. One neither of us were allowed to get close to. We've been good at keeping our distance.

But something about her photos. I couldn't stop looking at her. Beautiful Quinlan with her stormy gray eyes and the heart-shaped tattoo on her cheek.

She's been calling to me through her photos. A call I haven't responded to. A call I've done nothing about.

One week and she'll be ours.

Not like it matters. She's just another step of the plan. She couldn't and shouldn't matter.

My friends and our revenge do. That's that.

"Do you think he went to see her?" Liam's voice has my eyes snapping to him.

"Maybe. Probably." I swing an arm over the back of the sofa. Turn to look at the outside world where Liam aims his gaze.

The river is almost black at night. It's murky, alluring, in a sense.

Darkness used to scare me. Darkness was a picture-perfect penthouse with thousand-dollar chandeliers and spotless white and gold marble floors. Darkness was an abusive father that starved his children for fun.

Those days are gone. I own that bitch.

Fists. Blood. Pain. I'm the darkness.

"He wouldn't have done it without at least mentioning it." Liam sounds convinced. "Maybe he's out shopping."

"Maybe." I place my phone away and study him. One of his bare feet taps on the hand-knotted blue and white wool rug. "Still pisses me off that he's not answering."

"Yeah." Liam runs his fingers through his black hair. The wavy strands just fall back in place, on his forehead.

His unruly mid-length cut gives him a boyish look. However, confusing him for a boy is a mistake. Silent waters run deep and all that.

"Me too." He doesn't look pissed at all.

His fingers ghost the long, large scar across his cheek the way he does when he's deep in thought. His gaze turns inward. Searching for a reason.

"Maybe he did go to meet her. It's not like we weren't going to do it a—"

“Honey, I’m home.” Damien cuts into Liam’s words. His voice is devoid of sarcasm. Of anything, really. He sounds like…nothing.

As hollow as the sound his keys make as they hit the ceramic console.

That grabs our attention. Our friend crosses the foyer toward us. Damien still wears the suit he had on at the office. A quick scan tells me it’s intact. Not a crease on the expensive fabric.

That means jack shit.

He could’ve gone to Quinlan. Could’ve played mind games without touching a hair on her head.

If anyone can do it, it’s Damien.

We sit in silence, the questions hanging in the air as he approaches.

Damien could’ve told Tatum where he was going before he took off. He didn’t. On top of that, he screened our calls and messages.

Questioning him would get us nowhere. Nothing’s stopping us from glowering at him, though.

I cross my arms over my chest. Liam crosses his as well while Damien takes a seat at the end of the sofa next to Liam.

For a couple of minutes, he’s silent. Placing an ankle over his knee, his bright eyes cross from Liam to me. His lips are sealed in a tight line. No smirking. No cracking a joke to break the tension.

He’s less of his version of *America’s Sweetheart* when it’s just the three of us. But this, this is new.

“I went to see her.” Damien comes out with it before my temper gets the better of me. Before I demand answers.

“This isn’t like when she was younger. When you stayed away. You *want* her. Have wanted her for years.” Liam goes for the kill. The man’s worse at chit-chat than I am. “You didn’t check in with us, so you had to have talked to her. Had to have touched her. This wasn’t the plan.”

“You’re right. I should’ve said something.” Damien loosens his dark blue tie, relaxing into the sofa as if Liam didn’t just accuse him of going rogue.

Because Liam didn’t really accuse him of anything. Liam was being Liam. Collecting information to file in the millions of cabinets in his head. Pulling it out and drawing conclusions.

Predicting people’s actions used to be a survival method for him in the past. He’s never let go of that habit.

“There’s no excuse for what I did.” Dame’s calm and piercing stare passes from Liam to me. “I had to talk to her, and I did. I had to touch her,

and I did. Couldn’t wait anymore.”

I understand damn well how bad he had to go to her. Quinlan didn’t save me from Rex’s abusive claws, and I feel the pull this woman has on me anyway.

Fuck that. *Pull* is too subtle of a word. I’m obsessed. Have been for years.

For the first eighteen years of her life, Liam and I hadn’t been around anywhere near her. Damien had kept tabs on the baby, then the girl. He’d been worried for her safety first and foremost. Given what he’d gone through with Rex, it made sense.

Things changed when Blake, Quinlan’s younger brother, died. Rex hadn’t visited them as much. That raised a few red flags for Damien. For us. He never hit her, and that helped Damien breathe a little easier.

The girl was safe. Our plan wasn’t affected.

But at eighteen, her pictures started pouring in. She stopped being only Damien’s.

She was ours.

I didn’t have a single nice thought when our private investigators delivered her photos to us. Pictures of Quinlan jogging. Pictures of her sitting in front of a desk at home working. Of her hunched over her laptop in the café her dipshit brother manages.

The videos of her showering that Damien let us watch.

I’ve been obsessed with her as much as Damien is. I’ve admitted it to myself long ago. Have been celibate for years, because let’s fucking face it, no one compares to Quinlan. To what she’s done to my heart. No. One.

It’s not like I’ve been with a lot of women before her. Never needed anyone for months—years at a time.

Those days are over. I *need* Quinlan.

The three of us do. We haven’t admitted it to each other. No need. It’s glaringly obvious.

Damien stayed away from her because he wants her that much. Liam’s eyes talk a language I’m fluent at. He’s been eyeing Quinlan’s pictures for longer than necessary. I’m sure I have my tells.

So yeah, Damien’s obsession isn’t a surprise. We all share it.

“What do you mean you had to?” I demand anyway. He owes us answers. He has to realize he can’t disappear and do whatever the fuck. Has to realize she isn’t only his anymore. “You’re going to throw away years of plotting? Take her and disappear on us?”

Fuck. This isn’t me, being the jealous type. I don’t bitch about and moan.

I have my fists for that.

My nails dig into the inside of my palm. Liam senses this, his probing stare zooming in on my fists. I release them. Shrug.

No problem here.

“Fuck, no.” Damien’s fingers flex on his thighs. His eyes blaze. “Is that what you think I am? That something—*anything*—will be a good enough reason for me to pull the plug on this? I’ve cared for Quinlan since the moment she was born. This isn’t news to you. I’ll care about her well after we’re done.” He leans forward, pressing his finger to the coffee table between us. “But our revenge? I’ll never risk it. We will finish this. I had to talk to her. Had to touch her. The first we talked about, the second happened. The plan still stands.”

I glare.

“What else do you want me to say?” Damien’s brow furrows. “That I’m obsessed with her? Fine. I am.”

This isn’t a joke to him. None of this is. His adamance is enough reassurance for the time being. I’m still jealous.

Fuck. Me.

“Are you going to do that again?” I resist the urge to ball my hands into fists. There’s no comfort in being angry at my best friends. “Do we need to speed this up? Move the meeting with her sooner than a week?”

For fuck’s sake, please say yes.

“No.” Damien’s somber. Resolute. “We stick to the timeline. First, fuck with her head, fuck with it harder in the meeting. Take her. I won’t go anywhere near her without checking in with you two again. Won’t go anywhere near her again this week, period. You two are up next.”

It’s cute how he pretends he’s stopped loving her. How his feelings for her are purely sexual, how this is nothing more than a fixation. How she’s another pawn we move around the board of our revenge plan.

I let him have that anyway.

He’s being honest about what matters. And I forgive him.

There will be consequences for his stunt, however. He’s opened the dam by sneaking around, and I intend on monopolizing on that.

“What did you talk about?” Liam flips his Zippo between his fingers, sounding curious. “Our future roommate.”

“Our future captive.” The corner of Damien’s lips hikes to the side. This isn’t his signature smirk. He’s genuinely amused. “She tried to punch me.”

Punching? Violence? From her? “Why?”

“For stalking her.”

Ha. This won’t be the last punch she throws, then. When she finds out we’ve been stalking her for years. When Liam and I make our moves on her this coming week.

“Did he see you?” I ask.

Rex is smart. He would’ve recognized Damien’s face if he saw him around her. He’d send her into hiding. Get her on a Greyhound to fuck knows where. Our personal investigators would take forever to find her.

“No.”

“So you rattled her. Good start, Dame.” Liam snaps the Zippo open. Looks down at it. Slams it shut and gazes at Damien. “What else?”

“Pretty sure we’ll need to lock her up when we get her here. She’ll use a knife on us. I could sense that.” Damien raises an eyebrow. “Fuck, she’s so fucking pretty when she’s mad.”

Even prettier when he’s up close and touches her, I’m sure.

“I guess we’re going to find out soon enough.” I narrow my eyes at him.

Tomorrow evening is the perfect time. I won’t be getting back at Damien. I’ll have her.

Tomorrow evening, I’ll be the one to get punched by Quinlan.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Quinlan

“MORNING, QUINLAN.” RAY, MY neighbor, greets me as I step into the elevator.

“Hey.” I stand taller, pretending I’m not here in my pajamas while Ray’s in a skirt suit and her slick black hair is pulled into the most perfect chignon I’ve ever seen.

My neighbor and only friend doesn’t care that I look like a mess with my bun hanging to the side, either. We’ve done this before, me going to get the mail, looking like this while she’s on her way to conquer the world.

She smiles at my fluffy slippers. “How have you been?”

Swamped with work. Dreamed about a stranger with sapphire blue eyes in the few hours I got to sleep. He might be stalking me, could be here, waiting outside the building. I don’t want to see him, but I do.

I need him.

Heat rushes up my cheeks and I groan inwardly. No fucking way am I telling her any of it.

“I’m great.” I slip inside the elevator. “Love your outfit.”

“Thank you.” She nods, fingering the leather strap of her bag. “I hope they think so too.”

The doors to the elevator slide closed. “They? Your professors?”

We moved in here around the same time, and while I’ve been working, Ray—who’s three years younger than I am—attends college and works part

time in an accounting firm.

She's told me all about it in the few times we went up to drink wine on the roof. Drinks Rex knows nothing about.

"I have an interview at a law firm today." Her teeth are about to dig into her bottom lip. She quickly tugs them away, with good reason. It would've ruined her perfectly applied mocha colored lipstick. "As a paralegal. I'm so excited that I haven't slept all night."

Law firm.

My mystery man. The lawyer.

Not mine.

Anyway. Fuck. This has to be a coincidence.

"This is news. You never t—" My throat is choked at the surprise, and I cough, clearing it. "You never mentioned anything about being a paralegal."

"It's relatively new." We make it to the ground floor, both of us heading out. My feet scuff on the floor, her heels clink. "Last month, I woke up and decided accounting wasn't for me. I'm going to apply to law school. Become a lawyer."

"That's incredible, Ray." A smile stretches on my face. "Good luck in the interview, then. I'm sure you'll kill it."

I'm happy for her. I can't stop thinking about the smoldering sapphire eyes from yesterday. The lawyer who made my knees weak, my heart stutter, and my dreams dirty.

The butterflies in my stomach are fucking wild.

"Thanks." She lifts her hands between us. "Fingers crossed."

I mimic her, crossing my fingers in one hand, pushing open the door to the building with the other.

A gorgeous morning awaits us outside. The sun shines above us. Then a burst of wind swoops in, whipping a loose strand of hair into my eyes.

Ray strides out of the building, stopping three feet away from me, texting someone while I watch. The street, not her.

I'm curious. And hopeful. He could be here. I might not have time to date or kiss him, but I have time to look for him. I scan the street, checking out every person and car around me. On the pavement. On the road. Across the street.

I don't want him. I just want to see him. There's a difference.

A couple rush toward the nearest subway, each of them on their phones. There's a woman crossing the road, walking her German Shepherd.

A tall man stands out. He’s wearing a suit so dark it’s almost black. A strand of his wavy black hair drapes down his forehead. I think his eyes are golden, or amber. I’ll find out soon enough.

He’s coming over here. No, that’s wrong. He *prowls*.

Oh, no. Oh, shit. He’s staring back. Right at me.

Is he… Did he catch me looking at him?

Heat, worse than before, sears my already hot skin. A rope cinches itself around my lungs and tugs.

This isn’t happening to me. Can’t be. He’s probably looking straight ahead and I’m being paranoid. After yesterday, it’s no wonder.

After *him*.

And *he* isn’t here.

My heart dips to the floor. Foolish, foolish heart. Disappointed in not seeing a man I hadn’t met before yesterday. A man I’m pretty sure had been stalking me.

Sleep deprivation. There’s no other explanation for this. I’ll have to start taking melatonin again. I have to make the few hours of sleep I have a night count.

“We could catch up soon.” Ray pockets her phone, her white teeth glinting in the morning sun. “We haven’t had wine in forever.”

The tall, impossibly gorgeous guy stops in front of my building.

My eyes can’t help but follow him until he’s leaning against the exact spot mystery man pinned me to last night. My eyebrows can’t help but lower in question.

His somber gaze cuts into me. Amber, definitely amber. Flames crackling in the night. Burning coals.

Danger.

He twists his head to the street, giving me a reprieve from his intense glare.

Offering me a view of his profile.

A pink, bright scar spreads across his cheek. Chin to his ear. He’s clean-shaven and the scar is pale. It could explain why I hadn’t noticed it before.

The scar doesn’t take anything away from how gorgeous he is. The opposite. My need to reach out and touch him intensifies. A fire spreading through me, landing in my fingertips.

Jesus, I need to get laid. I’ve never done that, but it should help. It should fix this intense attraction I’ve been having to two men, for the past two days

in a row.

“Quinlan, did you hear me?” Ray waves a hand in my face. Gone is her smile, and in its place there’s an undercurrent of nervous energy. “I have to go, so…”

Oh, that’s right. I’m keeping her from her interview. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“You, me, wine?”

“I have deadlines,” I mumble, more heat creeping up my neck. This man is staring. I feel it. “When I have a spare moment, if ever, I’ll let you know. I’ll even bring the wine this time.”

“Deal. Bye, Q.” She grins, nods, then stalks off.

“Good luck,” I call out behind her. She doesn’t answer. She’s gone.

A strange, yet not unpleasant smell carries to me while I watch her blend into the morning crowd.

“Is this…” I whip around to look for its source.

The man who’s been staring at me stands there. He hasn’t moved from his place, holding to the corner of an envelope.

The rest of it is catching fire.

My eyebrows lower. His rise in a challenge.

Something tells me I can’t back away from here. I have to speak, no matter what comes out of my mouth.

Anything.

“Hate paying bills much?”

The man’s dark expression lightens as if I’ve turned on a switch inside him. He has the warmest smile. Warmer than the sun blaring in my eyes.

His smile vanishes when he returns his attention to the envelope. What’s left of it, anyway. He drops it to the floor, crushing it beneath his black leather shoe.

“You could say that.” His timbre voice is a hand diving into my chest. Holding my lungs captive.

“Are you new here?” I rub the tight spot over my heart. “I haven’t seen you around.”

He’s watching me, studying the movement. I should stop. Shouldn’t enjoy the heat in his gaze.

I do no such thing.

“No.” Roaring flames clash into me. I have to take a step back. I *stumble* back at the intensity. “I thought I’d write this letter and send it. Ended up

regretting it. The envelope had to go."

Such a simple answer. Burning an envelope in the middle of the street, early in the morning on a workday. Such an intriguing one.

"So there are no bills in there?"

"Already paid mine."

The envelope was empty. Why is he here?

Why does it feel like he's squeezing my heart even tighter?

"Someone else is indebted to me."

"Who?" I'm too brave for my own good. A man who sucks the air out of the street has the power to do anything.

"No one that should interest you." The stranger isn't being rude, despite his cutting words. He's being straightforward.

"And the envelope?"

"I wanted to burn something, so I did."

"Some people drink coffee." I'm breathless. Can't shut my mouth with how nervous I get around him. "You set fire to envelopes?"

A mistake.

"Yes." He pushes off the wall. Prowls forward.

He casts his shadow over me, cornering me.

My reckless lips keep moving. "Here? Outside my building?"

"Who said this had anything to do with you?"

His fingers brush along the tattoo on my cheekbone. They travel lower, to the trembling spot under my chin, tipping my face up. I smell him better from this close. Memories of the fire and a hint of mint.

"I haven't even met you until a few minutes ago."

"Why here, then?" I'm curious. Terrified and curious.

"It's a nice neighborhood. I went for a walk. Found myself here." Concise. No, simple. Everything seems painfully simple for him. I'm almost envious. "Nothing personal."

Would liking him mean cheating on mystery man from yesterday?

The one who evaporated without ever giving me his name? Yeah, no.

I'm not cheating. But I might die of lack of oxygen.

That, or he might kill me first. For no other reason other than it fascinates him, I think.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asks, voice low. "You don't look like you're going anywhere in these cute pajamas."

My cheeks flame. Fire burns me inside out.

“Well?” His eyes gloss over my clothes, the fluffy slippers. They’re dark. Wanting.

He doesn’t hate it. He really thinks my pajamas are cute.

“Umm.” I bite the inside of my cheek when the man brings his free hand to the side of my neck.

He pushes us away from the door of the building and shoves me against the wall in the same movement.

Air pushes itself out of my lungs. It burns, burns so bad to stay here, captured by him. The need to touch him transforms into a desire. It hurts my bones, this instant, uncontrollable desire.

“*Umm*?” He lowers his head. Our lips don’t touch. Our breaths do.

“I’m here to get the mail.”

“Want to get it now? Tell me if there’s anything you’d like me to burn for you?”

A surprised laugh slips past my lips. He’s funny. In a serious, pensive kind of way.

He’s blindsided me.

The realization sobers me. I school my expression. I’m done being a puppet.

“What’s your name?” He owes me that much.

“Liam.” Just a first name. “You?”

Two can play this game. “Quinlan.”

From up close, the scar tissue on his cheek seems sharper. I can tell where the skin is pulled tighter. Where the pink is a shade darker. My heart twitches at how painful it must’ve been, to endure it. Still, it’s not ugly at—

“Oh, I see.” His words are a whip. A slap across the face. “Disgusted by my scar, aren’t you?”

“What?” My eyes widen. I’ve been worried he’d see through me. That he’ll realize I think it only makes him hotter than he already is. Not this. “No. I—”

“You what?”

The hurt on his face is followed by a wall he’s erecting behind his eyes. I’ll have to be honest if I don’t want to offend him. If I want him to stay, I’ll have to say what I absolutely did *not* mean to tell a stranger.

Better desperate than superficial jerk.

“I like it.”

The hand around my neck twitches. Restricts my air flow. His expression is of blunt disbelief. Distrust. “You like it.”

Too late to be coy now. “I don’t like how painful it must’ve been for you.”

“Wasn’t too crazy about it myself.” His grip on me tightens. He tips my head up higher. Forces me to stare into his soul.

Testing me.

Searching for pity.

He doesn’t deserve it. He’s strong. He’s proud. He’s still standing, no matter what happened to him.

I don’t pity him one fucking bit.

Liam is silent. Holds me there as his captive.

He won’t let me go unless I give him the whole truth. Good, because I want to tell him the truth. I want to bare my soul to him. It could kill me. I’ll talk anyway.

“It suits you, the scar. Like a tattoo. Nothing repulsive about that.”

“A tattoo,” he muses.

“Yes,” is all I say. Overdoing it will only make him think I’m lying.

I am not lying.

“Sam, rushing the timeline will damage the product’s quality,” I hear a man say as he comes out of the building. “Is that what you want? No. Didn’t think so.”

Whoever the neighbor is, I don’t care. I care about the flames licking behind Liam’s eyes. I care that he’s not letting me go.

Reckless. I’m running into danger. Avoiding my responsibilities.

My job.

Asking Liam to release me is the smart thing to do. Walking away from the second confusing man to enter my life in less than twenty-four hours is exactly what I should be doing.

I stay silent, not saying a word.

“I should get going.” Liam takes the words out of my mouth. I gape. My mouth opens wider when he adds, “Goodbye, little flame.”

First darling, now this? If I were more into conspiracy theories, I’d say Liam and the man from last night know each other. That this is some kind of an elaborate prank.

By who?

Rex would never throw men my way. My parents are too checked out to pick up the phone, let alone plan something like this.

My clients are decent people. They're not after hurting me, either. They're satisfied with my work. The reviews and thank you emails say as much.

Definitely not my ex from junior high. We've both moved on since. It's been years.

My eyes snap shut, hiding my crazy thoughts from this stranger. He'll see through me, I'm sure of it.

"Goodbye, Liam," I whisper to the darkness behind my eyes.

His touch is gone first. Then the warmth of his presence and the underlying scent of ashes.

I blink my eyes open, feeling the bitter rejection on my tongue.

I was the one who wanted him to go. I'm not supposed to be angry that he did it. My knees shouldn't be weak. My breath shouldn't be labored.

I'm crumbling into the wall behind me anyway.

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CHAPTER SIX

Quinlan

BY LUNCHTIME, I'VE PUT Liam and the man from yesterday in the back of my mind.

I'm done updating a website for one of my clients after working on it all through the morning. It's a cute hair salon that's located in Florida, owned by the sweetest lady, Paulina. She added a mani-pedi section that's absolutely beautiful and made sure it would be eye-catching and hopefully, draw in new clients to the salon.

A smile teases my lips as I look over it one last time. I lean my elbow on the black wood desk I have resting against my expansive window, propping my cheek on my palm.

The view of the building across from me isn't much. Blue skies hanging over the closest brick building. It's enough for me. Blue is the color of hope. It's the color of someone's eyes.

Shut up.

I snap out of it, returning to work, emailing Paulina.

From: *QuinlanPalmer@Quinlansdesigns.com*

To: *Paulina@Paulinassalon.com*

Subject: *Your website is updated!*

Dear Paulina,

Your website has been updated to your specifications. You can now look over the unpublished version and get back to me with your input.

On another note, and I do apologize for sounding like a parrot, but the new section is truly stunning. I love how it's an extension of the hair salon yet it still has its own flare. The thin gold light fixtures are a brilliant touch.

Congratulations!

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Quinlan Palmer

Quinlan's Designs

I always make sure to hype my clients. Sprinkle that extra personal touch to my emails. Find a positive angle—anything at all—to add to my emails or over our online conferences.

It's not a hardship to be nice to them, not at all. They're great people and thanks to my clients, I get to put food on my table. Help support my parents.

I don't just appreciate them. I love my clients. I truly do.

As soon as I finish that thought, an email pops up on my screen.

From: *Paulina@Paulinassalon.com*

To: *QuinlanPalmer@Quinlansdesigns.com*

Subject: *Re: Your website is updated!*

Quinlan,

You've outdone yourself with this one! It's exactly how I imagined it would be.

Once again, you've brought my vision to life.

Since you like what I've done with the place, consider yourself invited. Maybe now you'll finally agree to visit me and get that hair—and now nails—appointment on the house.

Say yes!

Paulina Keller

Paulina's Salon

A week ago, I might've taken her up on her offer. Would've packed my laptop and dared to work on the beach. Maybe I would've gotten blonde highlights for the first time in my life. It's been a long winter. I could've spared a little cash for the trip. I could.

Then again, a week ago, I didn't have a life-altering job waiting for me. A job I'm excited to start.

Also, I didn't have two hot, mysterious men lurking around my apartment. A tiny part—fine, a big part—wishes I could see them again. That can't happen when I'm down in Florida.

My heart beats a little faster as memories of last night and this morning flash before my eyes. An unfamiliar yet not unwanted heat spreads through me. Starts in my neck and goes lower, lower, lower.

My thighs clench.

Abort. Abort. No rubbing one out in the middle of a workday. No matter how painful the pressure is becoming, I won't do it.

Instead, I shoot a quick email back to Paulina, thanking her for the offer and telling her I'll take a rain check. I'm about to shut down laptop, when another email comes through.

BLF Capital.

Shit. I celebrated way too early. They're going to pull the offer, aren't they?

My stomach plummets.

Deep breath. Stressing over the unknown is useless. Every second I'm wasting on fearing the worst is another second I'm wasting on not fixing it. Whatever *it* is.

Here goes.

From: *JeffersonBell@BLFCapital.com*

To: *QuinlanPalmer@Quinlansdesigns.com*

Subject: *Changes regarding your meeting at BLF Capital*

Dear Quinlan,

I hope this email finds you well.

Our VPs have a couple of requests regarding your meeting next week.

1. *No electronics are allowed in our offices. Any leak can be fatal to a company like ours. A notebook and pen will be supplied to you upon arrival.*
2. *The meeting hour has changed from ten in the morning to nine in the evening.*
3. *Please see attached the NDA contract attached to this email. I request that you sign this electronic copy and send it back to me by the end of the day.*

Kind regards,

Jefferson Bell
Head of HR, BLF Capital

Relief washes through me for a short second before dread wins over. Secrecy is one thing. Leaving my phone and laptop at home? Why not deposit them at the front desk?

I shake my head. This paranoia thing is getting old.

I've been through two strange encounters. I haven't had anything to eat since this morning. Freaking men. If I ever see either of them again, I'll punch them for real for making me feel this way.

This rattled. This unbalanced.

Food. I have to get food inside me.

First, the NDA. The contract is a basic one. Looks like a lot of legal jargon, but I get it. I've had a couple of clients that sent one of those to me over the years. BLF Capital is reasonable.

Whatever my eyes see or hear is to be locked down inside my brain, never to leave.

Here, I've signed it and sent it back to him.

Food next. I order from the nearest sushi place, another client of mine that gives me discount prices.

While I wait for the delivery guy, I call my parents. Maybe the good news will bring a smile to their faces. My new job did that to Rex. It could do that to Mom and Dad.

I try not to get my hopes up. Except I want to hope. Dammit, I need to. I know I fucked up all those years ago. It's my fault my parents are devastated. But—and it's so wrong to admit it even to myself—I'm desperate for them to treat me like their kid.

I wish that every once in a while they'd sound like they're happy I'm still here.

My fingers go to the heart-shaped tattoo beneath my eye. Blake. I remember him just as well as they do. Could never forget that horrible night even though it happened when I was five.

My baby brother.

Tears threaten to break free. I rub my eyes, forcing them back. Wallowing in these awful memories is something I promised myself I'd never do.

Rex made me stay strong for Mom and Dad. I've got this.

New job. Money to provide for them.

Good things are coming.

I repeat it like a mantra, then place the call to my parents.

The phone rings. It rings and rings and rings. I get up and start pacing the wood floors of my apartment. Walk by the white kitchen island and the black wrought iron stools. Trail my fingers on the exposed brick wall next to the floor-to-ceiling window. Slump down on my old brown leather couch.

By the tenth ring, I pull the device away from my ear, ready to hang up.

"Quinny?" my mother says, her voice hushed. Gravelly.

She's been sleeping.

"Mom." It's pathetic, how excited I sound that she picked up the phone. "How are you? How's Dad?"

"Good, honey. You?" Every word, even just these three, sounds like an effort.

I'll keep this short. "I have a new job. It's kind of a big deal."

I don't tell her where. Don't mention my uncalled-for paranoia.

The men I met and confused the hell out of me? I'm definitely keeping this information to myself.

I've learned over the years that my parents have lost the ability to carry a long, elaborate conversation. That's why I mince my words.

"That's great." A sigh. "Really great, honey."

She's doing her best for me. I should be happy about that. I am.

With more money rolling in, I could find a better psychiatrist for both her and Dad. They might have better meds to offer.

"I'm starting next week." I bite my bottom lip, pacing my small kitchen. "I'm excited."

Please be excited for me too. For us.

"You work hard. You're a smart girl." I don't want to imagine happiness. I've been disappointed one too many times. But maybe, please? "If anyone could make it big, it's you."

"Thanks, Mom." Stupid tears leak out, no matter what I do to blink them away. "Is Dad there? I'd love to tell him the good news."

"Your father's sleeping." Yawn. "Which reminds me. I think I should nap."

"Of course." Arguing that she probably just woke up will get me nowhere. Compassion will. I sure as fuck hope so. "Go. We'll talk soon."

"Right. Bye, Quinlan."

“Bye, Mom.” I wipe my wet cheek with the back of my palm. Look up and blink.

I stay there, still as a statue, until the delivery guy comes with the food.

Then it’s back to business as usual.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Rome

PAYING QUINLAN A VISIT yesterday evening didn't pan out.

Not for a lack of wanting. I wanted to. Very fucking much.

Wanted and couldn't due to a very inconvenient work emergency.

We had to go to an early morning meeting with the latest company we acquired.

Until he got there, Damien was there to remind them of the consequences of breaking their contract.

I was there to tower over them. Circle them like a shark while they shook in their seats. Issued silent threats that terrified them.

Liam, despite being late, freaked them the fuck out by staring at them.

Of course he didn't bother telling Damien that he went to see Quinlan. He left home at the same hour as us and got there almost an hour later, smelling faintly of smoke.

He was with her.

Got caught up in traffic and a shrug was all Damien and I got.

I wasn't jealous. In less than a week, Quinlan would be ours. Didn't matter what we did between now and then. Didn't matter one fucking bit.

Except I was jealous. I cared. The urge to have my hand around her slender neck has been banging against my skull for years. Hear her say my name. Say my friends' names.

There was nothing I could do with it.

We had work stuff to take care of. The infuriating meeting stretched well into noon, then there were other fires to put out in the office.

Stalking Quinlan, touching her, had to wait. She jogs four times a week, takes the same path each time. I knew she'd be there the next day. It annoyed me, but what choice did I have? None.

It put me on edge, nonetheless. All of it. The punching bag at our gym took the brunt of my anger the next morning. No gloves. No hand gauzes. Bare and furious fists that went at the punching bag again and again.

Until the wounds in my knuckles opened. Until they bled.

The tightness in my chest loosened after that. The pain helped. Knowing that this evening, once I leave the office, she's mine, made things even better.

I'll do more than bump into her while she jogs. More than mess with her head and her heart. I'll touch her. Have my hands on her. My mouth on hers.

My biceps pulse beneath my charcoal-gray suit. My teeth grind.

That's the least I'm owed for having to wait. For being the last in line.

No, that's not accurate. I'm not owed a damn thing.

But I crave it. The fuck I do.

The anticipation has followed me around everywhere. It's right here with me as I'm typing an email.

The office light makes it real fucking easy to see the damage I did to my fists. My busted knuckles are bright red against my black keyboard. It doesn't hurt anymore, which is a shame.

Pain soothes me. The constant companion I'd had throughout my childhood. The thing I'd welcomed into my life once I understood that owning it is better than being its bitch.

The emotional pain was what hurt the most. For Anne's tears and hunger and agony.

That was when I became truly angry. Furious to the core. I punched every available surface. Walls. Punching bags. People.

The relief it brings is unparalleled.

My phone buzzes on my desk. A message from my sister.

Anne: *God, I hate my boss. Loathe him.*

I sigh, shaking my head. The story is an old one. She's been struggling at Caldwell Mullins. The lack of appreciation of her in the small-time marketing company she works at is infuriating.

Their attitude toward her has to have something to do with Langford Marketing, our family company. Since Joseph is the CEO of the biggest company in the States. Anne's bosses seem to get a kick from showing her that her name means nothing to them.

She stays there to prove to them she can do it anyway. Handles it with grace.

Most times.

When these texts come, I know she's reached her limit.

My need to snap her boss's neck is as fiery hot as my obsession for Quinlan is. This girl I've never seen in person.

Ridiculous.

Unavoidable.

Me: *What's wrong? Do I need to kill him?*

Three dots dance on the screen. If it were really bad, Anne would've called. She's fine, then. No one's touched her or harassed her.

Nothing major to worry about.

That's what I tell myself as I grab my bag from under my desk. As I get up to change into my running gear.

They're just bastards.

My phone buzzes the same moment there's a knock on the door. The person on the other side doesn't wait for me to let him in.

Damien never does.

He saunters in, jerking his chin toward the bag in my grip. "Going somewhere?"

My phone buzzes in my hand again, and I read the message before I decide what answer I want to give him.

Anne: *Nothing punishable by death. He promoted his wife's cousin instead of me.*

Anne: *She doesn't deserve it. She goes home every day at fucking three, Rome.*

"Is that her?" At fucking last, I hear jealousy from my friend. Good to see I'm not alone in this.

"If by *her*, you mean my sister." I look up from my phone at him, tilt my head. "Then yes. It's Anne."

Damien stares at me for all of two seconds. Straightens the cuffs of his suit jacket. Sarcasm isn't something he expects of me. Well, tough shit. I never expected my two best friends to lie to me.

“Right, Anne.” He lets out a laugh, and I see it in his eyes. He knows I might be talking to Anne. That’s not where I’m headed. “Everything okay? You scowled back there.”

“The usual.” I shrug, my resentment toward him and Liam for lying to me forgotten. “Her job.”

“They’re still fucking her over for being a Langford?”

The clock inside my body tick-tocks, tick-tocks.

Quinlan. She’ll be out there soon. I can’t stay here.

“What do you think?” I give him a look that shows my disdain, then type Anne a message. “Hold on.”

“Got plans for tomorrow night?” Damien asks while I tell my sister she should do what I fucking did years ago. Break her trust fund. Take every filthy cent in it and use it to open her own company.

She’s typing. I don’t need to see her answer. She’ll tell me the same reply she’s been giving me for years. Our family’s money, be it our grandparents’ or Joseph’s, is filthy.

It’s an old conversation. One I always end with the same half-lie—the trust fund is the least he could do to pay back for what he’s done to us.

Truth is, it isn’t. Truth is, the least he and Elaine, our *mother*, could do is die.

Soon enough, they will. I can already smell their blood on my hands. I’ll smile when I rip their guts out of their stomachs. Laugh, even.

It sounds crazy. Gory. Violent.

Sounds like justice to me.

“Tomorrow? What kind of question is that?” I move past Damien toward the door. “You have my calendar.”

Damien catches up as I walk outside. We pass by Liam’s office. His door is open, his attention on his laptop.

The skyline of Chicago appears behind him. The pink hues of dusk paint the gray, thick carpet of the office in earthy tones. As the sun disappears in the distance, it’s another reminder that I might be late for Quinlan.

“Liam, I’m leaving for the day.”

“Have fun.” He waves without tearing his gaze from the screen. Doesn’t ask where I’m going. He knows. “I have a meeting with the head of research. Might be home late.”

I want to repeat to him what I said to Damien. That his schedule is no big secret. I stay silent. Head to our private bathrooms with Damien hot on my

heels.

Once inside, I shrug out of my suit jacket. Fold it and place it on the bench that stretches from the middle of the room and all the way to the wall. Repeat the movement with my shirt. My undershirt.

“Anyway.” Damien smirks. He’s up to something. It was obviously a rhetorical question, and I was too caught up in thinking about Quinlan. “We’re going out tomorrow. The three of us.”

“Why?” I frown, toeing off my shoes and losing my pants. “Where?”

“Quinlan’s neighbor? The friendly one?”

Ray. The one we keep tabs on. Can’t have any loose ends. I nod to Damien.

“She texted her boyfriend earlier. Wants to take Quinlan out on a double date. It’s a sin that a sweet woman like her is single and lonely.” Damien stops while I think a vein is about to pop in my forehead. “Her genius boyfriend told her he has someone in mind.”

I’m in Damien’s face in less than a second. I might be naked down to my briefs, but I’m at no disadvantage. I have my temper and my muscle tone on my side.

My hand curls around his lapel. “And you’ve known about this for how long without coming to me?”

“Thirty minutes.” His smirk widens. “I had to come up with a way to fix it, which I have. And relax. Liam has no idea either. I’ll tell him when the meeting’s over.”

“No one dates her.” Less than a week. That’s how long she has before she turns from a free woman to our captive. No one’s dating her in that week. Scratch that—“Never. No one dates her, ever.”

“Not even you?” he taunts.

“Got a problem with where I’m going tonight?” I release Dame and turn to put on my running gear.

“Nope. It’s only fair.” In my periphery, I see him smoothing his shirt. “She is ours, after all.”

“She is.” I sit on the bench and slip into my running shoes, tilting my head to Damien. “What are we going to do about her…date? How do we know she’ll even say yes?”

I’m still pissed. She could’ve bought Quinlan a puppy, for fuck’s sake. Why would she need anyone other than us?

“I know she will.” He leans on our lockers, planting his hands in his pockets. “Quinlan told me the other day she’s swamped with work. So I ordered Jefferson to email her again and say nothing’s expected of her for the first month at work. It’ll give her some free time. She’ll say yes.”

“The actual fuck, Damien?” My office clothes and shoes are in my bag, and I sling it over my shoulder. “Your plan better not end with me beating the crap out of her date.”

“We’ll be there.” Damien’s twisted logic starts making sense. I see it in his eyes. “The three of us.”

Everyone thinks that just because he looks like a ray of sunshine, that means he’s a good guy. They’re blind to the mask he wears. Have no idea what’s lurking beneath. How he plans to kill and torture the man who wronged him and his foster siblings.

How he installed a camera in Quinlan’s bathroom.

What a conniving son of a bitch he is. The best person I’ve ever met, other than Liam.

“Together.” His eyes twinkle. “It’s another opportunity to mess with her.”

He wants to play a game with her.

I want to see her, period.

“And she already sounded unlike herself in her texts to Rex.”

“I remember. We read her texts in your office,” I remind him. Just us. This is the part our private investigators can’t touch, other than the live feed from her shower. “You don’t have to repeat it.”

“Only reminding you that she needs a push in the right direction. Until then, I’ll listen in on Ray’s phone.” He raises an eyebrow. “Not hers. So I won’t get in the middle of your fun tonight.”

I frown, studying him. Forgetting about the time running out. “Sure you’re not jealous?”

“It’s all a way to get back at Rex. A game.” Before I call him out on his bullshit, he adds, “She’s ours, Rome. Better get used to that.”

I am. And it’s then that I see how I, too, am not jealous.

All I need is a few minutes with her by myself.

A few minutes to show her who I am. No bullshit. No distractions.

She and I.

I’m going to get it.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Quinlan

BRIGHT PURPLE SPORTS BRA. Matching T-shirt and black leggings.

Socks. Running shoes. Yup.

All set. I fix my high ponytail, lock the door to my apartment, and slide the key into the hidden pocket in my leggings. I'm out.

This morning, I thought I'd have to give up on running. Work doesn't wait for anyone, and I've got loads of it.

The thought came and went. I never miss my one-hour jogs, four days a week. I've been sticking to those for years. If I don't have my strict schedule set, I'd never get any exercise in, and I need it. I have to prioritize myself, otherwise I won't be able to work. Won't be able to provide for parents who can't provide for themselves.

Taking care of myself isn't a luxury. It's a necessity.

That's the lie I tell myself tonight. That it's only about my health.

The other reason I'm not staying in my apartment is them. The men I met outside my building.

Mystery stalker guy. Liam and his fire for eyes.

The idea of bumping into any of them wakes the butterflies in my body. Quickens my pulse before I've taken the first step on the sidewalk.

The realization that neither might be there sends a fresh wave of humiliation through me. It's pathetic, going out there, hoping I'd see them.

Fuck pathetic. They wanted me too. I didn’t hallucinate the look in their eyes. The way they touched me.

That was real. They were real.

Heat blooms in my chest. Shoots up my throat, scalding my cheeks. It’s been forever since I even thought about a man like that, let alone fantasized about two of them.

About a smirking, wicked stalker.

About an intense man who set an envelope to flame because he felt like it.

The sounds of the street are louder when I push the door of the building open. Louder when I walk outside, one cautious step at a time. I look around, trying not to be too obvious.

The wind chills the burning sensation across my skin, but it’s not enough.

My God. Look at me. Going outside to jog shouldn’t be such an issue. I take the same route every time I run. A left at the corner of the street. Wave at Rex on my way to Grant Park, where I run on the trail parallel to the river. Double back home.

The route is a familiar one. I could do it with my eyes closed.

Yet I stay exactly where I am. My feet planted on the concrete. Frozen in place.

A fresh wave of goosebumps makes me shiver. That same unease from the last two days comes rushing back while I’m standing here.

Someone’s intense attention is on me.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Can’t shake it. Can’t do anything about it.

Thoughts of paranoia are there and gone. This is real. As real as my quickening pulse. As the heaviness in the pit of my stomach.

I search the crowds for any sign on either of the two men. There are people all around me. Getting back from work. Walking their dogs. Milling in and out the storefronts.

So many of them.

None of them has sapphire blue eyes. None of them has the fiercest silent presence I’ve ever come across.

Not one single person casts a gaze my way longer than appropriate.

I’m. Not. Paranoid.

I won’t stay here to be toyed with. I spin to the left, taking the long way to Maeve’s. In less than fifteen minutes, I’ll catch a glimpse of my half-

brother working.

My shoes pound on the pavement, the jog helps me shake some of my worries off. When I run, I'm liberated. From life. From the burden of my past.

There's a presence somewhere nearby still. No doubt. The prickling sensation is ever present. The heat on my nape is undeniable. It hasn't left me over the last five minutes or so.

Whoever this is, they can make themselves known. Otherwise, I'm done being prey.

Or maybe I like it. Maybe I enjoy the chase.

Only one way to find out.

I pick up the pace, riding the endorphins. Faster, faster, faster.

My lungs have warmed up. My feet carry me forward.

Lights are on in a few apartments in my neighborhood. Some shops have the *closed* sign hung up.

I twist my body, sidestepping whoever comes across my path. White noise follows me as I weave through the human traffic.

The heat, that searing attention, it's somehow stronger. And fuck, I like it. Fuck, it's so wrong how it turns me on. I can't stand it.

The uncertainty, the tension. I lead a simple life. The single life. I don't know what this is and how to handle it.

Where are they?

Not to my left or right. Not behind me. Nowhere, really. There's no one here.

"Ouch," I huff. It hurts, bumping into a wall.

"Careful there, sweetheart."

Uh—this isn't a wall.

Walls don't speak. They don't have a low, bass voice. They don't smell so good and clean and manly. They don't have strong fingers that curl around my arms to balance me.

Talk about humiliating. I ran into a man. Not only that, but the same man is helping my clumsy ass to stay up on my feet. I turn my head from the street to the man who's holding me. He doesn't let go, even though I'm no longer in danger of face planting on the sidewalk.

First thing I notice about him is, he's tall. As tall as Liam and the mystery man. I'm pretty sure, since I have to lift my head up in about the same angle.

And he’s broad. I’m almost swallowed up by his size. His muscles aren’t *huge*, but he’s definitely lean. His biceps are accentuated through his sweatshirt…and I did think I bumped into a wall.

Other than how big he is, he’s gorgeous. Even backlit by the light of a streetlamp, his beauty is evident. My eyes make out every hard edge. Every sharp line. His high cheekbones. Accentuated jawline and a neat scruff. Thick, light brown hair has been styled in a buzz cut.

His expression is just as harsh. This isn’t what sends an icy chill down my spine. It’s him.

A hurricane personified. The embodiment of a storm. All stark highlights and grave shadows. Either this or that. Nothing soft about him. Nothing in the middle.

Then he does the unexpected. The corner of his mouth quirks up. A small smirk. His eyes, though, remain dark. The kind of dark the ocean becomes in the late hours of the night.

Terrifying. There’s so much violence in him that his body buzzes with it.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

My hands are numb. Since he won’t let me go, it seems like I should do something with them. Push him away. For once in the last three days, I should do the smart thing and run in the other direction.

At least create some distance between me and this stranger I barreled into.

And I…don’t want to.

“No need to apologize.”

The smirk is still there. Eyes still icy. He scans my face, lingering on the tattoo beneath my eye. Most people do that the first time they meet me. I’m used to the ink on my face drawing attention.

This feels different. No one’s ever looked at the heart on my cheek like that.

A thrill races through me. His focus is so intense. A raw emotion flashes across his features. A quick, fleeting show of something that resembles softness.

Is that…compassion?

Impossible.

He doesn’t know about Blake. Can’t know.

“Happens to me all the time.” The harsh, cold look returns to his face.

It’s insane, what this stormy night of a person does to me. I’m longing. Yearning.

Whatever it is, I’m hooked.

My fingers flex at my sides, itching to rise and grab his forearms for comfort.

I won’t do it. Won’t let him see it in my eyes, either. I cut my gaze down, and, oh man, big mistake. The sleeves of his black running jacket are rolled up. Veins cross his toned arms. Then there are the red lacerations that haven’t fully healed on his knuckles.

He bled, not too long ago.

Why was he bleeding? Who did he beat up?

Why did I turn into his captive and why the hell am I still obsessed with putting my hands on him? Why is watching him bleed so hot?

“Are you okay?”

“After what happened?” I fix my gaze on his stormy eyes. Suck in a breath and come up with something funny to say. Otherwise, I’ll do something reckless like…touch him. “Well, I guess, considering I just bumped into a, uhm”—*not that word, Quinlan, not that word*—“really big man. But I survived.”

Holy shit. I just said he’s *really big*. What the hell is wrong with me?

He takes a step back and rubs the scruff on his jaw. His hand slides slowly over his mouth. Oh God. He likes it that I called him that.

He’s hiding a genuine smile that reaches his eyes.

Then he shakes his head, and his hand isn’t on his mouth anymore. It’s at his side and his lips are once more pressed together in a severe scowl.

Our silence is loud, even in the crowded street. As loud as it is, it offers me a moment to think. A moment to *feel*. And what I feel is that I’m no longer being watched.

Could it have been him watching me? Do I have not one but two stalkers?

“Yes, you did.” The man slices through my thoughts. “Survival looks good on you.”

Before my silly heart can soar at the sweet words coming from ice man, he adds, “You should thank me, though.”

I should run, that’s what I should do.

“How come?” He’s freed me from his hold. I could do it.

I don’t.

“Well, because...” His head tilts, and his fingers brush an errant strand of hair behind my ear. “This wall saved you from the floor. This wall could’ve done more than help you settle in place.”

I shudder at his touch. At what he’s implicating. I really ought to start practicing self-preservation.

The street is bursting with people this time of the day. I could scream for help. Get the fuck out of here. Sprint past him and hope to get to Rex before this man makes his knuckles bleed again when he charges at me.

But no, he won’t hit me. I’m positive he won’t.

He could, though. Could crush me under his weight.

I wonder if he’d lose sleep over it.

Probably not.

“You have the proof to back it up.” My attention and his slide to his knuckles.

The man closes his fist. Opens it, then places a finger under my chin so our gazes would collide.

“The punching bag took a beating, true. It’s being replaced as we speak.” A spark, a flash of lightning appears behind the endless night that are his eyes. “If they haven’t changed it already.”

A punching bag. Huh. That makes perfect fucking sense. It reassures me and saddens me in tandem, knowing he won’t chase me down. That he won’t hurt me with those big, menacing—

Stop drooling, Quinlan. What’s wrong with you?

“What do you say we start over?” His eyebrows dip at the slightest. His hand releases my chin and he outstretches it to me. “What’s your name?”

This thing he’s doing is his version of nice. I can tell. Storms aren’t polite. They don’t put in the slightest effort at soothing those who are about to be hit by them.

They just exist.

This particular storm is trying. For me.

I slip my small hand into his much larger one. Force down another shudder at the touch.

My name is there on the tip of my tongue. A long monologue is right behind it, about how I didn’t see him coming. That I already have two men circling in my head, two men I shouldn’t think about, and yet I do.

It would be reckless to strike up a conversation with a third man, I want to tell him.

Especially when he gives off murderous vibes.

All I do is swallow around the lump in my throat.

“I’ll start.” He’s struggling with this. With being soft. “I’m Rome.”

He knows he’s scary. You don’t walk around with dried blood on your knuckles and think you’re anything other than intimidating.

“I enjoy jogging and demolishing the punching bags at my building’s gym for sport.” A twitch of his lips. An attempted smile. “Coordinating collisions is a part of my business. Metaphorically.”

A businessman who jogs and boxes. Of course, he is. His running gear is new and expensive. He even smells expensive.

I feel like I have to say something, so I mumble, “Oh, yeah. I get it.”

“Not a killer.” He glances at his knuckles, then at me. “Could I have your name?”

He’s right. He isn’t a killer. He’s extreme. And telling him my name shouldn’t be an issue.

“Quinlan. Hi, Rome.”

“Hi, Quinlan.” He shakes my hand before releasing it. “What do you do for fun?”

When I talk to Rome, the background noise, sounds and smells vanish. He commands my attention, and I give in to him. To this not-killer person.

“Run. Read. Work.” It’s embarrassing, how little hobbies I have. My face blazes.

Rome nods to himself. Is he bored or is he asking me to tell him more?

“I, uh.” A part of me wants to show him I have more in me than that. “Hang out with a friend when I have free time.”

His expression is stony. A wall has fallen over his eyes.

Against all reason, I need to get him back.

“I also sit around and work at the café my brother works at.” At that, his eyebrows lower, eyes flaring. “Half-brother.”

Mystery guy seemed pretty mad when I brought up Rex’s workplace. Rome’s harsh expression transforms into something else entirely. An emotion I can’t place.

“A café,” he muses.

“Yes, it’s on my running route.” What the actual fuck. I’m not telling this yet-another-stranger personal shit about my life. Oh, wait. I do. “He told me to wave whenever I jog past it. So he knew I’m okay.”

“Their coffee any good?”

What? “I, uh… yes?”

“Let’s go, then.”

Let’s go?

“I could use a shot of caffeine.” Rome takes a step closer. Angling my head up to stare deeper into his blues, I clench my fists to keep my hands from roaming over his forearms. They’re delicious. “It’s been a long day.”

Run, run, run.

“I’ll show you where it is.” A compromise. I won’t run. Won’t give him a glimpse into how badly he terrifies and allures me. “Then I’m off. I have to finish my route and work.”

“No.”

“No?” My jaw goes slack. My mouth hangs open.

“No, Quinlan.” Rome’s finger hooks beneath my chin. Snapping my mouth shut. “You’re having coffee with me. You’re staying.”

He did not just say that.

“I—”

“No.”

“Excuse me?” I shiver at the dark cloud that descends over him.

“No, Quinlan.” He straightens himself, so tall that he blocks out the sky. That he cages me in. “I said no. As in, I’m not asking you to come. I’m ordering you.”

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CHAPTER NINE

Quinlan

“I SHOULDN’T BE GRABBING coffee with strangers.” My last attempt to save face sounds weak. It *is* weak.

I want to have coffee with Rome.

Fuck.

“Your first name is Quinlan.” His bass voice slams into my chest. A fist curling around my heart, squeezing it. “You blush when I get too close. My busted knuckles make you uncomfortable. Being around me scares you. Yet here you are, blushing. Wanting me to hurt you in ways no one has before. Ways I can assure you’ll get off on. That’ll make your pussy wet and nipples hard. You won’t admit to it, but you will, and I’ll be there for all of it. For when your cunt clenches around me. For when you soak my hand and cock.”

He catches my gasp by placing a thumb to my lips. Smirks at my obvious surprise and the lust. So much of it.

I’ve been obvious. Given too much.

And there’s no taking it back.

I’m going to die. That’s it. I’m just going to take my last breath and die right here, at his feet.

“I’m Rome.” His finger on my mouth presses harder. Shushing me. In a way, to have him ignore my body reaction is worse. More humiliating. Hotter, too. “I’ve been told I’m a good cook. I was born and raised in

Chicago. Never left. And I'd really like to have coffee right now. With you."

I blink, my refusal drowning beneath his attention. Beneath his dominance.

"Here. I solved your problem." He releases my lips, sucking on his thumb. I glare at him doing that, but he simply crosses his arms over his chest like nothing's happened. "We're not strangers anymore."

No. You *are* a stranger. A terrifying one. One that makes me so, so curious.

"Okay. We aren't strangers."

"Good girl." Rome pauses. Lets the praise sink in. And boy, does it ever. "After you."

I'm a deer in the headlights. Consumed by his gaze. It's the darkest I've ever seen. It messes with my head.

Leaves me no other option other than head toward Maeve's.

Rome places a warm, possessive hand on the small of my back. We start walking, and after a few tense seconds, I realize that I'm not guiding him toward the café.

He's the one doing the guiding.

Or maybe he's just in tune with me. Listening to my body language. Has to be it. Has to be why he can tell where to turn.

"We're here," he announces as we stop before the café.

Did I tell him the name of the place? I must have.

Chin up. A firm nod. "We are."

I'm done looking timid or confused. I'm not this person in real life. Besides, Rex is inside the café. One scream is all it'll take, if Rome decides to hurt me or gets out of line.

Rex. Right. He'll never approve of me hanging out with a random, hot guy. What was I thinking, bringing Rome here?

One guy tried to flirt at Maeve's a couple of years ago. He made things worse by joking about how overprotective Rex is and how he's hovering. Said I'm a grown woman and I can do what I want, and that includes dating him.

"Get the fuck out," Rex had growled at him. "No one comes between me and Quinlan. She'll never get rid of me… For some asshole like you. Beat it."

That was an odd word choice, I remember that. His anger was familiar. The rude stranger left me alone, and honestly, I didn't think anything of it. Back then, I was kind of relieved. I had work to do and the other man wasn't my type anyway.

Rex will undoubtedly do the same today.

I'll hate my half-brother if he scares Rome off after he's being such a gentleman, holding the door for me, ushering me inside. I'm a little giddy. Well, a lot. So much so that I forget about Rex. I even don't care as much about Rome knowing where Maeve's is.

With his hand on my back again, I feel less like a lamb being led to the slaughter. I'm ushered in by the dark knight.

"Woah, there." Wayne prevents a near-collision by sidestepping me, a smile on his face. "Oh, Quinlan, hey there. Cutting your run short to come hang with us? Hell froze over and no one bothered telling me?"

I giggle.

A low, aggravated sound that reminds me of growling comes from my right.

Rome.

He's jealous. Holy fuck, he's jealous.

The butterflies in my stomach are hard to ignore. To be claimed by the storm is more than thrilling. I've never had that before, and it's addictive. Stupid and oh-so addictive.

And a red flag. A hot red flag.

"Oh." Wayne grimaces as he looks behind me. It's rude, for Rome to threaten Wayne who's always been so kind to me. "You brought a friend."

I elbow Rome's side while looking around for Rex. He's nowhere to be found, even though the evening crowd is thinning out.

"Hi, Quinlan's friend. I'm Wayne." Wayne gives kindness another shot. "She and I are basically family."

This time, the low sound of disapproval Rome makes sends a chill up my spine too.

"Okay, then." Wayne plasters his most customer-friendly smile on and pats my shoulder. He raises his eyebrows a tiny bit, relaying a secret message. If the scary man behind me is bothering me, I'm not alone. "Have a seat. Rex took a call in the kitchen. He'll be right out. I'm sure he'll be pleased to see you."

Yeah, he'll be pleased, all right. Pleased to punch Rome in the throat for touching me.

"Thanks." My lips are sealed as I smile back at him.

He moves to serve one of the last customers as Rome, gentle yet determined, leads me to an empty table. In the center of the café.

"Thank you," I say when he pulls out a chair for me.

Nervous. That's how I should feel, over the moment Rex will come out here.

The butterflies, though. They won't let me go. Won't stop me from staring at Rome while he lowers himself to the seat at my side.

He's sitting in the cheap chair in Maeve's, but nothing about Rome seems cheap. He's regal. Filling the old, worn-out chair with his presence.

The warm lights bathe us in a soft orange glow. Not us, not really. Rome isn't soft. He's as hardened as he's been for the last fifteen minutes, except for that one second he looked at my tattoo.

"Do you take your coffee black? No cream, no sugar?"

He snaps me out of my lust haze. My heart slows and I'm cold all over, hugging my middle. "How did you know?"

"Lucky guess." Rome raises two fingers, calling Wayne over.

This dread, this skepticism…I hate them.

I push them aside. He sees me, and it's fucking nice. I won't shame myself for it.

"I can go to the bar and order our drinks. What can I get you?"

"You're not going anywhere." He motions for Wayne again. "I'll order. I'm paying. You're staying here right where I can see you. Right where I can listen to you talk."

I could've run a hundred miles and not be as red in the face as I am now. "I thought you wanted coffee."

Dark blue eyes flit to mine. "I said I wanted you here too, didn't I?"

The world closes in around me. He's too much. The two other men I've bumped into were just as consuming.

Just as invasive.

The last of my self-preservation comes to my rescue. "Why me?"

"I'll be honest, Quinlan."

"Please do?"

"I could sit here and tell you half-truths. Say I'm interested because you're a beautiful woman." His confidence is glaring. He's being blunt, and

he doesn’t give a fuck. “Because you were warm and sweet in my arms. Because I like the way your name tastes on my tongue.”

His tongue. He runs it over the top row of his teeth, as if he’s making a point. Seducing me further into his depths.

It’s working. My thighs clench under the table. I’m biting the inside of my cheek to silence my heaving breaths.

“It wouldn’t be the whole truth,” he clips. “I want you to tell me everything about you because I. Fucking. Want. To. That’s it. And you’re going to give it to me. Also because I fucking want to.”

“Quinlan, your regula—” Wayne starts.

“Coffee. Two. Black.” Rome talks over him while his attention remains on me. “Thank you, Wayne.”

In my periphery, I can tell Wayne scurries away. This isn’t like him, to be so jittery. Then again, it’s not often that you have a hurricane for a customer.

“Quinlan.” Rome’s hand reaches to my neck. Holds on to the side. Squeezes.

“You confuse me,” I whisper low enough for only Rome to hear.

His hand is a collar, gripping me possessively. His eyes are hot. “Tell me something about you. Something that’ll please me.”

He tips my head up. With his other hand, he drags my chair closer. The sound of it dragging on the floor is louder than the song in the background. Chandler Leighton’s “MONSTER.” It’s too hard to listen to the song when I’m being swallowed up by Rome.

My breath hitches. Rex’s phone call isn’t over, that’s for sure. Otherwise, he would’ve been here. Would’ve rescued me. Probably would’ve grounded me for life. Even though he can’t do that, he would’ve found a way.

Except… Do I want to be saved?

“Where should I start?”

He’s so close. Blue eyes are all I see. There’s an underlying anger in them. And lust. “Favorite food?”

A laugh almost bursts from me. He isn’t asking what I do for a living. What my goddamn last name is. He’s asking about—

“Food?”

“Yes.” His grip on my neck becomes painful. Possessive, like he had his hand on my back. Like he owns me. “Tell me.”

“Lasagna.”

“Lasagna,” he repeats. Rome’s voice is rough. More mouthwatering than any meal I’ve ever had. “Why’s that?”

He reads me like an open fucking book.

He’s forced me to remember, and that hurts. Tears prickle in the corners of my eyes, threatening to leak out. The why is a secret. A painful one.

Rome squeezes me tighter. He’s safe. He won’t let anything happen to me, including my memories.

This is so fucked up.

“It’s the first hot, homemade meal I remember making.” I don’t add *after what happened*.

My eyes flicker to the side. No Rex. Good. I don’t want him to feel bad about what I’m going to say to Rome. He could never help me cook. Burns everything, he said. He brought groceries over. Told me it’d be better if I learned it from the Food Network on TV.

I understood back then. I do to this day.

“Go on.” Rome forces my gaze back to him, one harsh tug on my neck is all it takes. “When was that?”

“When I was seven. Six and a half?”

There were more meals I made. Cereal, for example. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Then Rex said I had to try harder for myself and my parents. So I did.

“My parents weren’t big on eating. Or cooking.” Fuck the tears. I blink them back. Pretend my tattoo doesn’t sear my skin. “I burned it, the first time. When I got it right, it was like I won something. A war against the oven. How silly is that?”

His teeth gnash together. He hauls me closer to him. His minty breath fans on my skin, and his eyebrows lower on his forehead. He’s furious. His anger is barely contained beneath his cold, impenetrable veneer.

“Six and a half.” It takes me a moment to realize he’s talking about my age. “You’re the one who cooked for your family? All this time?”

“I still cook for them. Sometimes.” When they let me come over. “Rest of the time, I order in for them.”

“Unacceptable.”

One word, and I’m trembling. Rome says this like a promise.

“What’s unacceptable is you touching my sister.”

At Rex’s warning, a grin slashes across Rome’s face, reminding me he’s a predator. I’m wet between my thighs. Terrified of what that grin means and

yet wanting it all the same.

Rome pulls back by an increment, twisting to look up at Rex without releasing me.

If anything, he holds me tighter.

“Half-sister,” Rome corrects Rex.

“Let. Her. Go.” Rex’s hand is on Rome’s shoulder.

“I don’t think I will.” In a swift, graceful movement, Rome wraps an arm around me. Yanks me into his lap and locks me to his chest. “She’s comfortable here. With me.”

Everything happens so fast that I gasp. His thick cock pokes my ass when I land on him and Rex is there, standing over us. He’s furious.

I’m helpless.

As if Rome has some sort of control over me, I stay put. Don’t question why he’s doing this or why he’s being this crude.

It’s obvious. Rex is being demanding and angry. Rome has been possessive from the second he saw me. He’s violent, that’s another thing about him.

What isn’t as clear is why I’m comforted by it. My hands find his strong forearm. Finally. His skin is smooth. Blood pumps beneath his accentuated veins.

“Quinlan.”

I can’t bring myself to look at Rex. Rome’s busted knuckles are safer than Rex’s wrath. They are.

I’m choosing the side of a total stranger.

I’m choosing my freedom.

Or is it another prison?

“Let her go,” Rex repeats when I don’t obey him. I hear the effort in Rex’s voice. He’s trying to drag Rome’s chair back. Force Rome out of it.

Emphasis on trying.

Rome’s feet are planted to the floor. His muscles strain. He and I don’t budge an inch.

“You’re harassing my sister. You need to leave.”

“Harassing?” Rome barks a laugh. A clipped, mocking one. His hand splays on my stomach, pulling me—no, thrusting me—against his cock. Oh no, his lips brush my cheek. This is what dying of humiliation is like, isn’t it? “Quinlan’s a big girl. She’s here with me of her own free will. We’re having fun, aren’t we, sweetheart?”

Rex’s rage is everywhere. It’s damn near as intense as Rome’s fingers as they dig into my stomach. “Quinlan. Get the fuck up.”

No more hiding. Rome was right, I am a big girl. Without giving it another thought, I whip my head up. Furrow my brow as I level him with the most serious glare I can muster.

Which is a terrible hardship. All these emotions are making a mess out of me.

On the one hand, I’m turned on by Rome and his scruff grazing my cheek.

On the other hand, Rex’s controlling behavior is pissing me off.

My brother has been great all these years. And overbearing. If I don’t do exactly as he said, he throws a fit. Screams at me. Belittles me. He said it’s what big brothers are for. That it was for my own good.

I’ve let it go on for as long as I have to spare his feelings. I’ve been okay with his temper. With him throwing a tantrum when I didn’t tell him where I’ll be and when.

He’s given me some rope over the last couple of years. Although he didn’t let me have it without a fight.

This has to end. He can’t treat people like this, including me.

Rome is scary and demanding. I’ve gotten lost in him more than once during our short time together. Yet he’s far from being the bad guy. A truly bad guy wouldn’t have wanted to sit here, of all places. Where my half-brother works. Where I could be saved.

He was being a gentleman.

So what if Rome is intense? If he’s danger and secrecy wrapped into one person?

I’m twenty-three. I’m entitled to fuck up. To cry over a guy. To let him touch me.

“It’s fine, Rex. I’m fine. I—” I get up from Rome’s lap.

More like, I forcefully pry his hand from my stomach and push myself up right before Rome locks my wrist in his grip. At least I’m standing on my own two feet.

“You.” I spin to Rome, angling my face up since he’s already standing. “You’re nice. But make no mistake, you don’t own me.” Quickly, I meet Rex’s glare. “Neither do you.”

Had Rex not been so short-tempered, I might’ve been more lenient with him. More graceful. Except he has been quick to react, and I’ve had it. I

might even ghost him for a week just to get my point across. Show him how mad I am.

"Quinlan." A vein throbs in Rex's forehead, his voice hushed. He's avoiding a scene. Either that, or he can tell I'm on the edge. "Please. Let's go home. Just the two of us. We'll discuss this at your place."

"No."

Rome's hand comes to rest on my shoulder. I shrug him off and storm outside where the embarrassment wouldn't sear my skin as badly.

I need air. I need to be alone.

And I'm not. Rome's presence at my back is electrifying.

"I'm not sorry." He catches my wrist once we're out in the street. "But I can take you home. You're upset because of me. It's the least I can do."

Please do. "No."

"Yes, I would." He lowers his head, dark blue eyes posing a threat. A million of them.

My heart hammers in my chest. My nipples are pulled tight. Rome's nearness, after the week I had, is intoxicating.

His hand cups my cheek. The other one's on my hips, yanking me toward him.

"No."

"Maybe I haven't made myself clear." Rome is right there, in my face. "I will walk you home. And you'll let me. Just like you'll let me kiss you."

His mouth crashes into mine. His lips are hot. His kiss is angry.

He's sweeping me in his whirlwind. Kissing me where Rex can see. Where the world can see.

His aggressive assault on my lips is as powerful as everything else about him is. His teeth are as violent as the energy vibrating from him. He sinks them into my bottom lip. Groaning. Soothing my sore flesh with his tongue. Gripping my cheek harder.

Fuck. He sucks the air out of my lungs. Loops an arm around me and yanks me to his front. Pressing his hardness to my belly.

My hands fly up to his arms, holding on to him for dear fucking life. I'm dizzy with how much I want him. After the last few days, I've been needing *this*.

"Quinlan," he grunts. His lips trail lazily along my jaw. "You'll let me walk you. Are we clear?"

"I'm willing to give you my number. That's as far as I'm willing to go."

“What is that?” My predator stares at me. One of his eyebrows is cocked. “Talking back?”

My first instinct is to say *no*. That I consent to anything and everything he wants to do to me. That I’m eager to hand over to him the thing I haven’t wanted to give anyone else. My virginity.

But I didn’t just make a scene and force Rex to stay where he is to backtrack a minute later.

“This…” I lift one hand, wave it in his face. My neck heats before I let the words tumble out. “Your possessiveness. It’s hot. We just met, and you’re not fucking around. I like it. But I’m not a doll. You can’t boss me around.” I gulp. “A lot.”

Some of Rome’s anger simmers. The creases on his forehead smooth over.

Less fire, more ice.

“No more running today.” He presses a kiss to my nose. I almost faint. “Straight home from here, sweetheart. It’s getting late.”

A second later, he’s gone. Rome’s wide shoulders and his seriously cute butt are all I see as he takes off.

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CHAPTER TEN

Liam

I'VE WATCHED DOZENS OF people conducting shady deals. Been there to witness a man confessing to being on the brink of losing his business. A woman talking to her accountant about how her startup would pick off the ground if she just had someone investing in her business.

That's the nature of my job. Watching. Spying. Gathering information that would help us decide whether we're going to waste our time and resources on a company or not.

It's taken me years of doing this to develop my innate instincts. Hours of paying careful attention to detail. To companies. To people.

Me and my research department don't always go about it the legal way. More often than not, we don't. That's just business.

What I've been up to over the last thirty minutes has nothing to do with corporate espionage. Stalking Rome and watching him interacting with Quinlan is personal.

I had to do it. My curiosity nagged at me. The need to observe was a compulsion I couldn't resist.

Ten minutes after Rome left the office, I followed him.

My team had reports to walk me through. Due diligence of a company I'd had my eyes set on for a while to show me. A crumpling retail company. Its decay had been slow and continuous. One unfortunate business decision followed the other. Your Home & Co.'s financial projections—insiders

informed them—would be catastrophic. Real estate would be all that'll remain of them after they declare Chapter 11.

This wasn't the first time I'd be seeing these reports. I convinced Rome and Damien to wait before we pounce on them. Hold out until they reached that delicate spot between rock bottom and salvageable.

They were there. Glossing through the reports was all the evidence I needed.

Far more interesting research was waiting for me out there. Rome and Quinlan. Dame asked me to stay to tell me about the stupid double date and his plan to derail it. It wasn't necessary. I overheard his and Rome's conversation and I let him know.

Damien laughed it off while he walked me to the elevator. This doesn't surprise him about me.

Being a voyeur is a part of me. This isn't just about sex. It's who I am. Plain and simple.

And thank fuck for that. Otherwise, I would've missed this. Sneaky fucking Rome, bringing her here. I was close enough to hear him demand that of her.

I've been Rome's friend for over two decades. I understand why he insisted.

He wanted to fuck with Rex. Wanted to have Quinlan proving to him she'd rather be with him than with her brother.

Two birds, one wrecking ball in the shape of Rome.

He's kissing her and, yes, *fuck*. I'm silently rooting for him when he kisses her. When she kisses him back, it's over before it's even begun.

Rome stalks off without sparing a glance in Quinlan's direction. Her lips stay parted as she stares at his back.

Rex isn't there to comfort or shake her out of it. A client demands his attention inside. By the looks of it, she yelled at him there. He wouldn't chase her for the world. Not tonight.

Over a minute passes when Quinlan snaps her mouth shut. Then she shakes her head and turns to the direction of her apartment.

Her bouncing sandy blonde ponytail is the last thing I see.

She's gone.

I'm taming my desire to go after her. Have her cornered like yesterday. Make a mess out of her. See how soaked she'd be when I have my hands on her.

My fingers curl around the Zippo I keep in my pants pocket.

I put the desire in a box. Close the lid on it.

Temporarily.

Pleasure comes in different shapes and forms. It can be physical. That's obvious. That's an easy gratification, no question there.

Waiting, though. Watching. Planning. That gets my cock just as hard. Just as throbbing. My brain is seduced, and the pleasure of it lasts longer. Goes deeper. It's there way after the orgasm is nothing but a distant memory.

Quinlan's pictures and videos over the last five years were the longest, most stretched out foreplay of my life. And I still get off on watching her.

I'm never going to get enough of her. When the revenge is all said and done, the feeling will remain. I have no doubt about it. I may have not confessed it to my friends. It's there regardless.

I. Feel. It.

All of it.

Ours.

We're done with these bullshit one-on-one stolen encounters. Time to join forces. To do something about this ache in my pants. My friends hurt for her too.

Waiting for her to go out on that blind date is bullshit.

We're having her tonight. Even if she's not awake for it.

Especially if she's not awake for it.

Convenient and kind of her to start taking melatonin before she goes to bed. I'll have to thank her for it. Later.

I push off the brick wall, taking a different path than Quinlan to her apartment building. Navigating through the shadows of the night has become second nature to me. That dark blue suit helps me go unnoticed.

The invisible man.

While I take the backstreets and alleys by foot, I shoot a text in our group chat.

Me: *Quinlan's apartment. Midnight. Could be later if she stays up. Wait for a text from me.*

Damien: *Why?*

Me: *Too busy with work to make time for her?*

After our meetings, my analysts always send him the reports about our future acquisitions. He double-checks their reports, then starts drafting a

contract. He likes being prepared for our sit-downs with the companies we acquire. Study them, see where we can squeeze them some more.

He has business to attend to, as well. An online conference. Part of *my* revenge.

Damien: *Fuck no. I'm wondering where that came from. Rome went to see her this evening. We're going to their double date this week to fuck with her date and her pretty little head. So. What happened?*

Of course he'd still act like we're just fucking with her. He's been fighting his obsession with her for years. Telling himself he: A) is her protector; B) will use her for revenge. He loves her.

He'll see that on his own soon enough. Or maybe I can push him to admit it.

Why the fuck not? It's for his own good, anyway.

Me: *I need to kiss her too.*

Well, that just happened. I've been blunt. Exposed my feelings in the process. Fuck it. I hate lying to both of them. Done with it.

We haven't had a secret between us until the photos of this beautiful eighteen-year-old started piling up on our desk. I've allowed this to go on for five years.

This is where I draw the line.

Silence.

Me: *I won't do it by myself.*

Damien: *What do you mean* too*? Rome? The fuck he's talking about?*

Rome: *I had a feeling you were watching, Liam. Why didn't you come say hello? Rex would've lost his shit. I wouldn't have minded, if it benefited our plan.*

Again with this plan bullshit. Fine, let Rome be delusional too. It won't last.

Damien: Too. *Fucking kissed her* too.

Damien: *I swear to fuck, if I wasn't on this online video conference…*

He would've called. Would've let out his carefully suppressed anger out for what Rome did. He'd say how much he wants to kiss her first. Then make a joke about it.

Ripping the mask off for too long means vulnerability, and Damien hates that.

I'm aware.

I'm also here. Outside her building. Watching her window.

Rome: *She tasted so sweet. Moaned so pretty for me.*

My brow furrows. This isn't Rome, this taunting. This delicate pushing of Damien's buttons. He's the bulldozer of the three of us.

Then again, he has to be pleased with himself. He kissed her hard. Fuck, I felt a jolt of arousal, and I stood across the street from them.

The light in her bathroom flicks open. Next, she'll shower, wash her long, thick hair. Rub soap into her soft curves.

My cock strains in my pants. The pressure has been there for the last thirty minutes. It's become uncomfortable. Painful.

But not unwelcome.

In a few hours, I'll have my release.

Me: *I'll text you. Bye.*

Until then, I'll do what I do best.

Watch.

And wait.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Damien

"THE CLEANING CREW IS a liability," I tell Gwen, the manager at McMahon Condiments. The small condiments company that we bought from her family. "Get rid of them."

Normally, a company this size wouldn't be a blip on BLF Capital's radar. We would never be bothered with acquiring a business with such miniscule profit margin forecasts.

Except a certain Miss Aria Kimble—Liam's ex-babysitter from hell—works there.

Or should I say, *worked*.

"The five of them?" Gwen tucks her hair behind her ears. Once. Twice. Her pale-blue gaze is horrified. "They've been with us for years. Just because one of them forgot—"

"It's one of them today, another tomorrow." My easy-going nature is nowhere to be found. My expression is steely. Deadly. "As I said, a liability. We need to hire from scratch. People who aren't total fuckups."

Rome and I are the ones who deal with them, since it's personal for Liam. All it'd take is for Gwen to mention to someone the man with the distinctive scar, and the rumors would spread throughout the small business.

Aria, as dumb as she is, will put two and two together. She'll ruin our plan.

We can't have that.

“They forgot to put up the mandatory *Caution Wet Floor* sign on the plant’s floor.” My accusation is delivered in a derisive voice. “Good thing there’s one decent person left in your plant to have reported it back to me.”

This wasn’t a decent person. Nor did the cleaning crew forget any fucking sign.

The woman who moved the sign and took a picture for me got paid handsomely for her efforts. For waiting for Aria to go on her bathroom break to stage the scene.

“The rest of the cleaning crew minus the culpable one”—Aria, granted —“will be compensated for being let go.”

We’re not after them. But they’re a distraction. Firing them makes it look like we haven’t targeted this one person. That we’re cleaning house.

“Mr. Black, I’m urging you to reconsider.”

I’m too involved in our group chat on my phone to hear Gwen’s blabbering. Liam says we’re going to be touching Quinlan while she sleeps. Rome admits to kissing her.

He kissed her before me.

A surge of jealousy blinds me. It’s fucking suffocating, this thing. This strange feeling.

My Quinlan.

Mine.

The moment you planned on locking her in your apartment, she belonged to the three of you. Be grateful he didn’t bend her over in the middle of the street and spank her just be-fucking-cause.

That settles the green monster.

“Mr. Black?” A shrivel of hope can be heard in Gwen’s voice. “Would you? Reconsider?”

She’s mistaken my silence for kindness. Thought I’m texting the others, asking them whether she gets to keep her cleaning crew or not.

The only thing I’m considering is Quinlan in her bed, sleeping with the three of us there.

Jerking off to her.

We want her. We have a soft, toxic spot for our future captive.

There’s no use denying that anymore.

No use in continuing this conversation, either.

“Enough, Gwen.” My hardened gaze means I’m not fucking around. My hand slices the air between us. “You’ll fire the five of them. You. This isn’t

a request.”

Her face blanches. She’s pale. Shocked at my abruptness. Over the year we’ve been the owners of her family’s company, I’ve never been this hostile.

That’s Rome’s job.

Mine is to trick her into believing we care about their legacy.

All I care about is her firing Aria.

Gwen will toe the fucking line.

“Wait, I—”

“Goodbye.” I end the call. Stare up at the ceiling. Let out a low curse and return my laptop and work.

There’s shit to do. Contracts to draft before I send them over to legal.

Before we head out to be with Quinlan.

Beautiful, sweet, and innocent Quinlan is ours.

So what if Rome kissed her first?

Liam and I will kiss her tonight.

That’s what *ours* means.

And when we blackmail her… When we kidnap her…

I’ll have her lips available for me all the time.

Whether she’ll be on board with murdering her brother, that’s a question for another day.

Now, for the contract I have to work on…

My phone rings on my desk, stopping me before I typed the first letter. Then I pick up my phone and see who’s calling me.

“Jagger?”

Over the years, most of the kids from the foster homes I lived in have fizzled out of my life. Those who hadn’t been tortured.

They didn’t go through what Jagger, Laurel, and I had. The physical and mental abuse. The pain. The scars. The need to protect one another. How I failed them some days.

Our bond isn’t as strong as the one I have with Liam and Rome. I’m still very much connected to them. Through our friendship. Through joined work projects.

Through our revenge plan.

“Dame.” Jagger sounds older than his thirty-one years today. His voice is hoarse.

“What’s wrong?” I’m already up. Already picking up my keys and heading to the door. My heart belongs to Quinlan, and I’ll be with her. Once I solve this mess for Jagger. “Someone tipped the police again? They’re close? Where are you?”

That’s usually what happens if the police aren’t involved. It’s an occupational hazard when you make a career of providing fake IDs. Some of your clients are trash and decide to turn on you. Not us, though. We need his business for our revenge plans.

That, and the fact that he’s like a brother to me.

“No one’s on their way.”

“Someone at your home, then?” That, too, happens every once in a while. Have I mentioned he has trash for clients? And his girlfriend moved in with him two months ago. “Is Nila okay?”

“Chill, super lawyer. Nila’s fine. She’s at work.”

“Well, what is it? You sound like that when you call from the police station. How the fuck am I supposed to react to that?”

No one matters to me in this world. No one but my people. I’m feral over them. Protective down to my bones.

Leaving Quinlan out there with Rex broke my goddamn heart all those years ago. But she’s been okay. She’s been a fucking pro. A straight-A student. A young entrepreneur. He might not have been the best brother. She grew up to be an incredible woman, regardless.

She’s been waiting for me, that’s all. In a few days, I’ll be the knight in shining armor I was destined to be. *Her* knight. As dark as I may be.

“Like you’d react to any hungover asshole,” he groans, and I could kill him.

Hangover.

“You’re a jackass, you know that?” I return to my chair, throwing the keys across the desk. “Start with that next time. And why are you hungover this late? Did you really just wake up?”

“Yeah. Worked late, partied later.” Of course they did. They’re allowed to do shit and get fucked up like I never allowed myself. “Anyway, what crawled up your ass and died?”

“For your information, I was fine before you called.” I stick my fingers in my hair. “Not my fault you decided your idea of fun is giving me a heart attack.”

“Jesus, mom vibes much?” Someone else’s mom, granted. Both our moms bailed on us when we were babies. “Or worse. You sound like Rome.”

“Rome?” I bark a laugh, the tension slowly leaving my body. “I’ll try to live up to it, then. Next time we meet, I’ll punch you in the gut. No gloves and all.”

“You’re too pretty for busted knuckles.” A woman’s voice.

Laurel.

“You two are sneaky fucks.” I lean back in my chair, smiling. Nothing’s bad happened. Everything is fine. “Laur, isn’t it two in the morning there?”

There, as in France. There, as in miles away from the sickening memories she couldn’t take anymore.

“It is, big brother.” We aren’t blood-related, weren’t even born in the same state. But I’d acted like one for the period of time we’d lived at Rex’s. Paid her student loans the moment I could afford it. “And since when do I sleep before quarterly reports?”

She’s an accountant these days. Has her own boutique firm. I’m so fucking proud I could cry. Except I don’t. Never.

“I did not. I didn’t forget you’re pregnant, either. You should be resting.”

“Pregnant isn’t synonym for dead,” she corrects.

I bet she’s patting her swollen belly as we speak. Her and her husband’s, Pierre. He’s a walking, talking green flag that adores my friend. He better. On their wedding day, I explained to him how easy it’d be for me to jump on the next flight and kick his ass in case he hurt her.

“I’ll work until pumpkin decides she’s had enough of my womb.”

“Right. Anyway.” I’m happy for her. I really am. I’ll be even happier to bury myself in work until I’m inhaling Quinlan’s scent. “You two have something to say or is this another we’re-checking-up-on-our-Damien call?”

Most of all, they check up on Quinlan. They’re on board regarding the revenge plot, but they worry about her.

They made it known before Jagger and I walked Laurel down the aisle.

“Are you fucking serious?” Her blue eyes blazed. Laurel looked like she was ready to tear at the chignon her hairstylist worked so hard to put in place. Her black curly hair wasn’t easy to tame. “Now? At my wedding? This is the time to tell us this, Damien?”

I laughed, then Jagger did. She slapped both our arms.

“Figured God wouldn’t pass on the information to the cops.” I shrugged.

“One time he did.” Jagger’s dark eyebrows lowered on his brown eyes.

His hair was cut short and brushed to the side. So different from when we’d lived at the Palmers’ house. Back then, Jagger had it overgrown just to spite Rex. He’d succeeded. He’d even punched Harlow when she came near him with scissors.

It’d landed both of us a nasty bruise under the ribs because, of course, I had to stand between them.

“Someone tipped the police when I was outside this church, and—”

“Ugh. Okay, fine.” Laurel threw her hands in the air. “You have my approval. You need our help with it, don’t you? Go ahead, ask. Pierre will wait.”

She rolled her eyes, hating to let Pierre wait. She did anyway. And I asked both of them for their help.

“Yes, it is,” Jagger clips, pulling me out of my memories. “Have you lost it yet?”

“About that.” I lick the top row of my teeth. “Does buying an island count?”

“Buy any island you want, Damien.” Laurel laughs. She’s used to my bullshit. “We’re talking about a certain someone. A certain woman.”

“Yeah, is she, uh—walking among us?” A mangled way to ask if Quinlan’s alive from Jagger.

“She was always meant to be, assholes.”

“Cool, cool,” Jagger grunts.

“Keep that—” Laurel’s yawn cuts through her sentence. “Up. Don’t do anything crazy. She’s special to us too.”

Special. For them, maybe.

For me, she’s an obsession.

“Your bed and husband are calling,” I say instead of starting our usual banter. “And you, Jagger, go drink some water.”

They reply with a “Yes, Dad” in the same mocking tone at the same time and hang up.

Words, contracts, and bad intentions come next.

All a distraction until I go to Quinlan.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Damien

LIAM: *The lights at her apartment are out.*

At fucking last.

I'm already showered and changed into a long-sleeved black T-shirt and a pair of jeans. Shoes and black sneakers with soft soles that'd silence my footsteps on her hardwood floor. No belt or boxers, either.

I'm ready for her. Ready for this.

The three of us there, and her. Our Sleeping Beauty. She'll wear our cum on her skin. On her full lips. Seeing it play out in my head disrupted my workflow. My concentration suffered.

I hadn't even called Rome to tell him I didn't care he kissed her first. I got over it. I couldn't do anything except think about her.

And the wait is finally over.

I snatch my keys from the desk, typing as I walk to the elevators.

Me: *Be there soon.*

Rome: *Leaving home.*

Good. He and I will get to talk once we're all there.

In her bedroom.

While she sleeps.

The thought assaults me for the hundredth time this evening. I run my fingers through my damp hair and look at myself in the mirror. My blue eyes stare back at me, and the smirk returns.

We could take our plan to the next level. We could drug her.

We *should*. Once I start kissing her, I don't know that I'll be able to stop. A taste of her lips would do nothing to soothe the ache in my soul. The incessant craving will take over common sense.

I'll end up biting her. Licking her. Sucking on her pretty pink lips while I have my cock in my hand.

While I hear the sounds of my two best friends fucking their fists.

Jagger has contacts in the city. He could get us something strong to knock her out for hours.

We could do it.

We won't.

Messing with her head is okay. So is forcing her to live with us, which is basically kidnapping her. Touching ourselves while she sleeps, that's not as bad, either.

For some reason, I draw the line at drugging her. She bought melatonin, it should be enough.

After I park in a back alley, I walk over to where Liam and Rome wait for me. Hidden in plain sight, just how Liam likes it.

His scar is a part of the reason why Liam's preferences are the way they are. The other part is the woman who's responsible for the scar being there in the first place. He'd studied the narcissistic bitch, tried to understand the mind of a psycho.

There's no understanding a cold cunt like Aria.

There's only killing her.

Fuck her. Fuck that.

I'm going for a boner tonight, not a limp dick and an aching heart.

I'm minutes from being with my savior. My pawn.

Our woman.

Quinlan.

Her name fixes my problem. I'm hard. All the blood in my body goes south.

"Dame." Liam waves me over to him and Rome.

I join them, and the first thing I notice is Liam looks exactly like he did when he left home this morning. Suit pressed. A strand of his hair over his forehead. His expression neutral.

Staying out here for hours is just another day in the office for him.

"Hey." Rome jerks his chin.

His eyes are near black, almost the color of his T-shirt. Hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

It occurs to me that I should thank him for kissing her.

I haven't admitted to myself that I have a soft spot for Quinlan.

The gratefulness and obsession have always been there. Using her has been a part of my plans since the day she was born.

Dirty fantasies came last, when she turned eighteen.

But there are other feelings there.

And Rome helped them up to the surface.

He's searching my face, his lips pulled tight and his jaw clenched.

"How's it going, thief?" Jokes are what I do. Emotional crap like thanking him for exposing my emotions, that's not my thing. "I get it, though. Would've done the same. Except she wanted it so much that I had to deny her."

A huff of a laugh escapes Rome. He's well aware that I'll never talk about Quinlan like *she's* the one desperate for either of us. She isn't.

We might be fucking with Quinlan. Truthfully, she's the one who has us wrapped up around her little finger. We're the ones desperate for her, as much as we're driven to get our revenge.

"Couldn't stop it." Rome reverts to his serious self. "Her brother acted like a goddamn possessive ass and—"

"He *what*?"

Rome tells me everything, and I'm pissed. We were supposed to piss him off. He wasn't supposed to take it out on her.

And yeah, I get it now. Why Rome turned into a territorial animal around her.

"Fuck." I roll my shoulders, trying to relieve the tension that's settled there. Failing. "If I were you, I probably would've bent her over in the middle of the street and fucked her right there. All that adrenaline—"

"Only you wouldn't." Liam points a finger at me. "You're not going anywhere near him until we have her."

"I know," I growl, impatient. Desperate to go up and see her already.

"Love makes you do crazy things."

"How do we plan to get in?" No way is he talking about love to me. This isn't the time. Isn't the place. Bad enough that it's in the forefront of my mind. "Did Rome convince her to leave it open while he kissed her?"

“No.” Rome doesn’t laugh. “We did not discuss her chain lock on her door.”

“It’s like you don’t even know me.” Flames flicker inside Liam’s amber eyes.

I do, in fact, know Liam. No lock or safe will get between him and the information he’s after.

Information, or woman.

We’re quiet after that, strolling into Quinlan’s building as if the three of us live there. Go up her elevator as if we’ve been here a thousand times.

Liam bends over, picking Quinlan’s locks while he’s standing over the (*not) welcome* doormat.

I glower at the text beneath Liam’s shoes. I’d bet a lot of fucking money that Rex got her that. At first, I’d believed he loved her. Then the accident at the pool happened, and he changed. Wouldn’t let her out of the house. Told her it’s safer inside.

Made it near impossible for me to catch glimpses of her.

I believed he’d been protecting her. It was too late when I realized he hadn’t.

Our investigators said Rex told her it’s for her own good.

Truth is, he didn’t want anyone laying a finger on her. Didn’t want her to see there’s other, less shitty people out there. Didn’t want her doing anything except taking care of her parents.

She wasn’t getting away from under his sick, possessive thumb.

He’d done the same thing to me and my foster siblings. Brainwashed us into thinking this was it for us, being stuck with him until we’re out of the foster care system.

The muted sound of the last lock pulls me out of my nightmares. Liam pushes the door, and we’re inside her apartment.

Quinlan’s unique, intoxicating smell hits me first. My eyes adjust to the dark as we walk past her living room. Past the exposed brick wall, her work desk.

Her apartment is organized, just like it was in the pictures from our investigators. The gray throw blanket is folded neatly on the back of her couch. Not a single glass, mug, or a dish have been left on the coffee table or in the sink.

Rome’s played mind games with her today. Liam and I had before him. Yet somehow, there’s no sign of it in her place.

We have to do better. We will, when, not if, she goes out with Ray on her double date. We'll shake the foundations of the ground she stands on.

It's twisted and wrong to be turned on by the idea. It makes me impatient, pushing past Liam and Rome on my way to her room. Our sweet virgin won't realize what's hit her until we're already deep under her skin.

Would you look at her, sleeping peacefully.

The moon beams filtering from the window have bathed her in gentle silver light. A duvet covers her sweet body, her hair spread on the pillow. The melatonin bottle sits on her bedside table, a glass of water next to it.

Darling, I mouth, hovering over her.

I'm here, at the edge of her bed, my face and hers are inches apart. She's on her back, as quiet as Rome and Liam are as they join us.

I shake my head instead of saying, *this won't do*. I peel off the duvet, lowering it to her knees.

Rome's steps are muted as he positions himself on the other side of Quinlan's bed. Liam sidles next to him.

Neither of us speaks or does any other thing for a couple of minutes. Long, excruciating minutes while we stare at Quinlan.

She's fast asleep. Her beautiful body doesn't stir. Heavy eyelids remain where they are.

I make the first move. Turn my fantasy into reality as I slip my jeans button out of the loop, lower my zipper and push my jeans down my thighs.

The three of us never jerk off before each other, but I can't hold back. The compulsion is strong. Too strong. I have to relieve this tension building inside me. Need this friction. My sick mind is dead set on debasing Quinlan, and it starts here.

I'm throbbing. Dripping for her. It doesn't matter that Quinlan's all innocent in her white tank and cotton panties. It only serves to turn me on more.

Her body makes for a beautiful shell, but my obsession runs far deeper than that. I could jack off to her soul.

With my cock in my hand, I stroke myself while my two best friends watch.

Let them stare. Let them see how much I want her.

They don't lose their pants at first. Rome leans in, flipping her tank top up over her tits.

He pulls a pocketknife out of his pants, looking at me. I stop pumping, and the fucker grins before hooking his fingers into her waistband.

Snap, and Quinlan's panties are sliced. In a movement that's so subtle and unlike Rome, he slips the torn panties from beneath her. Inhales her scent, shoving them into his jacket.

He'll have to share once we're home.

Until then…

What a beautiful little plaything she is, letting us use her.

Rome steps back, a ghost of a smirk on his lips. A taunting one, telling me he stripped her for my benefit.

That has to be his depraved way of apologizing to me for kissing her first. For putting his lips on the girl that was mine before she belonged to either of them.

All yours, his dark look tells me.

Liam has his hand in the pocket of his pants. He pulls out his Zippo, flicks the top open. Fire lights up his eyes as he slides them to Quinlan.

He's not stressed. He's impatient. Rome has to be too.

They'll lose it soon.

They'll join me.

Can't fucking wait.

I'm running my hand over my cock again. Feel the pulsing veins. The skin stretching. The dampness.

Her eyes are closed. In my head, I order her to keep them open.

Look at me while you're being my filthy whore, darling. Whenever you're down there, on your knees, sucking me, you aren't allowed to close them. Ever.

She'll be such a good girl. We, unlike Rex, deserve her obedience. We can be cruel and cold. We could use her for our plan. But we made sure her room would be impeccable. That her life with us will be comfortable. Her bank account padded. She'll never want for anything.

She'll get used to our brand of crazy.

She'll love it.

My free hand begs to wrap around Quinlan's thick, long locks. Like I would if she'd be kneeling for me. She'll be wet for me, would moan as I fucked her throat.

Her gaze will be locked on mine. On the scars slashed across my abs. If I'll be reckless enough to lose my shirt before her.

She’ll know. Then and there, she’ll know it was Rex. She’ll see through me. Will realize in a heartbeat how well and truly deranged her smirking stranger is.

She’ll understand this one undeniable truth. No one endures abuse like I have and comes out unscathed. In his body. In his mind.

She’ll see, and I’ll let her.

In due time.

Fuck, I want her. I rub faster. Squeeze myself harder. More precum dampens my thumb at the thought of choking her. Of punishing her for all the years I couldn’t have her.

“Oh, fuck,” I hiss, placing a hand on the pillow beside Quinlan’s head.

My friends take themselves out. I’m beyond noticing it.

It’s only her lips. Only those pouty, pink pillows and Quinlan’s soft breaths.

One, long and fucking agonizing second passes when my mouth is above hers. Another torturous one follows when I settle my mouth on hers. It’s there, barely pressed to hers.

Sweet. Painfully sweet. And perfect. I feel like I could be here, like this, throughout the whole night. For the rest of my life. Inhaling her scent, our lips touching.

Until the inevitable happens.

Out of all the things I’ve dreamed of doing to Quinlan, being gentle has never been one.

The agony of not doing more than pressing my lips to hers hurts. I’m struggling. I do it anyway. Pump my fist faster while the rest of my body is frozen by the strength of my muscles. By sheer will.

We have so much planned for her. We won’t wake her up. Won’t snatch her in the middle of the night.

The plan.

The fun part of watching the fear on her face when she realizes she has no choice. When she understands that this is it; she’s coming to live with us.

Kinky and wrong, that’s what it is. Looking forward to having her cornered and at our mercy. Willing to do anything for us. It’s cruel, even for me.

I. Need. That.

Rome’s hushed growl reminds me that I’m not alone. That I had my kiss and Liam hasn’t. I can still hear them fucking their hands. Skin on skin.

Labored breaths.

Liam won't come before he kisses her. I won't allow it.

Except that when I rise, leaning on one hand, I'm disappointed. Quinlan's lips don't glisten. She doesn't have a piece of me on her. I can do better.

"I'm not done with you," I whisper, collecting saliva in my mouth and spitting.

There it is. My mark on her lips. It's not cum, not yet. Close enough, though. My twisted brand of lip gloss is nearly perfect.

I grit my teeth, cursing under my breath. My cock jumps in my hand when I swipe my saliva on Quinlan's lips with my tongue. I'm being gentle, contrary to every instinct in my body.

This claim on her, it's fucking intoxicating.

And I'm done being selfish. I move to the side, hand her over to my two friends. They don't move in right away, and I get high on looking at them there. Jerking off, their eyes hungry as they stare at Quinlan.

They're hot for her. For our woman.

For years, I haven't felt this whole as I do now.

Liam moves first. He angles his body until he's towering over her. He doesn't have his cock in his hand anymore. His Zippo is in his free hand, the one he's not leaning on.

He flicks it open, casting a warm glow on Quinlan's beautiful face. Casting ember light on the tattoo on her cheek.

After we break her, we'll fix this part of her. We'll heal all her broken pieces.

Including the ones we smashed.

This is the closest Liam's face has been to a flame ever since the day he got his scar. Normally, he holds it at a distance.

That's her. All her. She's asleep and she's already changing him. Turning him even braver than before.

He recognizes it, too. A faint smile crosses his lips. He brushes his mouth to hers, offers her a soft kiss. He hardly ever touches her.

When he straightens, I see it. His heated expression tells a million stories. Creases cross his smooth forehead. Eyebrows low.

He's affected, regardless of how tender he's been with her. Maybe because of it. The stolen moment. That first forbidden taste.

She has the power to drive any man or woman insane.

Too bad for everyone else who'll never get to have her. She belongs to us. Her consent isn't necessary for it to be true. She's been our most precious acquisition since we started BLF Capital.

We're not turning her over for profit. For any fucking thing.

He pockets his Zippo into his jacket pocket, and he's back to joining Rome and me in beating off to her. Nothing else. It's as if the feel of Quinlan's mouth is the only thing he's ever dared to wish for.

Only he hasn't, has he?

Neither of us has. Minutes pass, and then—

"Oh, fuck," Liam hisses, his voice barely audible.

He's going to come on her. I have to see that. And I do, catching the moment his hips jerk forward and white cum shoots from his cock. It lands on Quinlan's nipple, on the top of one of her breasts. That's his mark on her.

Fuck, that's hot.

Her chest heaves, her breaths laden. She's sleeping. She's also wet, I realize, when I tug her leg to me. Just a little. Just to see what I need. Her inner thighs are as damp as her lips, as her untouched cunt.

Her subconscious is tuned in to our presence. She's wet and needy for it. For us.

Movement in the room tears my attention from her pussy. It's Liam, tucking himself in. He shifts to give Rome the space next to her face.

Rome bends at the waist for a quick kiss to her lips, then he's up again. Bites his bottom lip while his hand moves faster on his cock.

"Sweetheart," Rome grits behind clenched teeth. It costs him—whispering instead of fucking her. It's obvious because he's coming in the next second.

He aims his dick to Quinlan's bare stomach, releasing his orgasm on the slope of her belly. His climax fills up her navel, yet he's far from being finished with her. He gathers his orgasm on his finger, painting Quinlan's lips.

The depravity of it all pushes me that much closer to the edge.

Closer to losing my mind.

Not yet.

I'll have to settle for coming.

"Fuck." When I'm there, when I shoot my orgasm onto her. I mark her unclaimed tit. My seed coats her swollen breast. Her peaked nipple.

Yes. That's it.

I’m spent. Spent, and still deviant as fuck.

She hasn’t come yet.

I arrange myself, ready to join my friends. As if we’ve been doing this for years, Liam and Rome have their hands all over her.

Liam rests his open palm over one of her breasts, brushing it in circular motions. Her moans are low and hot in the small room that smells of sex. Of us.

Rome cradles one of her cheeks. Shoves his thumb between her parted lips.

Only when I’m sure neither of the two have disrupted Quinlan’s sleep do I go for it. I suck on my fingers, wetting them. Quinlan’s pussy lips are swollen. Her clit hardens beneath my fingers.

Her thighs clench and I fucking love it. She’s mine. Of course I’d know how to touch her. How to rub her. How to bring her to an orgasm.

She finishes in a matter of seconds. Her body spasms, eyes pinching. I’m not sure where I want to look, and so do Liam and Rome. Our gazes rake over every inch of Quinlan. We keep pleasuring her until the last of her shivers dies out.

Calm and sated. That’s what she is. Sleeping better, thanks to us.

I trail my fingers on the inside of her thighs, sucking on them. Liam and Rome do the same, their eyes closing with how fucking good she tastes.

Without a word, Rome rights Quinlan’s top on her body. I tuck her in.

Nothing to do about the panties.

Can’t say I’m sorry about that. About leaving her naked from the waist down.

Walking away, though. That hurts like a mother. A self-inflicted punishment I plan on rectifying this week and every day after this one.

We’re coming for her.

She won’t know what hit her, our future captive.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Quinlan

MY PHONE RINGS EARLY in the morning before my alarm.

It's really early then.

Early means bad news.

My eyes fly open, and I scramble for the bedside table.

A morning from two years ago is a horrible, vivid memory. One year into my move here.

Dad calling me, saying Mom's sleeping. That she doesn't respond to him. *I don't know what to do,* he'd mumbled.

Rex wouldn't answer—he mutes his phone when he sleeps. I had to go there by myself, calling 911 on the Uber drive over. I cried and begged the driver to go faster, and she did her best.

By the time I made it, the paramedics were walking out the door. Nothing happened to Mom. She woke up by herself, yawning and telling them how tired she's been lately. There wasn't alcohol on her breath, and I counted her pills. Nothing out of order.

That was then, though.

The heart tattoo on my cheek feels like a wound. Or is it that my heart is pounding all over my body, stretching my skin?

"Hello?" I answer without even looking at the caller ID. "Mom?"

"Umm." A choked laugh greets me. A woman's. "I hope not?"

I bring the screen up to my eyes, blinking at it. "Ray?"

“Yes.” A sweet chuckle follows. I’m beating myself over not recognizing her sooner. “Not Mom.”

“What’s up?” A few horrifying seconds and I’m already sweating. I drop my head back to the pillow, throwing the duvet off me.

That’s better. The cool air of the room on my body. I needed that. I—

What the hell?

Did I forget to put my panties on after the shower?

“I’m good.” She sounds relaxed.

Definitely not confused, like me.

The duvet rustles on the bed when I throw the rest off me.

Where are my panties?

It’s possible I stripped them in my sleep. I did have a very, very dirty dream.

My horny subconscious brought all the men I’d met over the last week to me at night.

One pair of sapphire blue eyes smirked at me. Tore my T-shirt off my body and bit my nipple so hard I cried.

Inquisitive amber eyes sparked when Liam advanced on me next. He held his Zippo close to his face. The flames flickered across his features before he positioned it between my thighs. Not close enough to burn me. Close enough to make me squirm. The danger felt good. *He* felt good.

Then the dark, dangerous blues or Rome. His harsh grip on my chin turned into a hand collar. His fingers were a gag, shoved down my throat.

In my dream, they knew each other. In my dream, they used me exactly how I wanted them to. Relieving myself of my panties in real life isn’t that farfetched.

“Quinlan, you there?”

“I am.” My panties aren’t.

They’re nowhere to be found. No soaked, scrunched fabric on my white sheets. Nothing on the floor. Only dampness between my thighs. I throw my feet off the bed and drop to my knees.

Maybe they’re under the bed. I must look hilarious. My ass bare and up, phone pinned between my ear and shoulder as I scour for my panties with my ass out. “Sorry. You were saying?”

Weird. No panties there, either.

For the first time this morning, I realize this whole situation is bizarre.

Even this phone call. My neighbor and I hardly ever talk over the phone. We bump into each other on the elevator and make plans. Or we knock on each other's doors with wine.

What's going on here?

"No worries," she says. "I probably woke you up, and here I am, talking your ear off."

Could be I'm in the wrong. That I didn't put on my panties after I showered last night. I had a lot on my mind.

The kiss from Rome, for one. The argument with Rex at Maeve's, for another.

That's it. I was confused and heady and frustrated. I worked long hours. The melatonin knocked me out.

My panties were the last thing on my mind.

"You're good." I walk over to my dresser to hunt for a pair of underwear. "I'm listening. Shoot."

"Remember we talked about hanging out?"

"Of course."

We talked before Liam and Rome happened. A day after mystery man made me dizzy and scared.

"Listen, I know you're busy, but…" Ray stops. Probably checking if I'm listening.

"A little less busy today."

Less busy and panicking after the email from the head of HR in BLF Capital. I want to impress them. I *will* impress them. But they won't pressure me for fast results. I have some breathing room. I have to clear my head.

I can spare a night with Ray. Her, me, and a bottle of wine. We'd laugh, drink, talk about life. Most importantly, it'll be just us.

No distracting, confusing men to mess with my sanity.

"Great, because guess who's going out today? Us." A car screeches next to her. A man curses. "Hey, Alden, it's okay. Nothing's happened. I wasn't even close to the road."

Alden, her boyfriend. She mentioned his name months ago. I guess it's serious.

"Anyway." Ray clears her throat.

"I thought we were drinking here? I could bring a bottle of red. Or white."

“No staying in tonight. We’re going out, and that’s final.”

“Um, okay.” I pull on my panties, confused as hell. When I have my sweats on, I head to the bathroom to brush my teeth. “You and me, then? Sure.”

“Us and two others.”

My forehead scrunches as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. At my bed hair and the black circles under my eyes. “Who?”

“Alden, me…” She pauses. “And Hugh.”

“No.” This is beyond rude, this sharp reply.

I don’t care. I’d rather buy a whole case of wine bottles than go out on a double date.

First of all, I don’t have time to date.

Second, these three men I met. They won’t let me be. They take up so much space in my mind and heart. I can’t forget about them. Can’t choose between them.

Bringing another man to the mix?

“No, Ray. No, no, no.”

“No?”

“I don’t—” I stare at my reflection again and see something else. My cheeks are flushed. Lips swollen. I must’ve bit them in my sleep. God, that’s embarrassing. “I’m free for a girls’ night out, not a double date.”

“I would never assume you’d be up for a double date.” A beat of silence. “Unless you asked me to hook you up with someone?”

“Definitely not asking.” I splash some water over my eyes.

“Good. Since this isn’t a double date,” she reassures me. “Thing is, Alden starts his internship next Monday. And I’m pretty sure I landed the job at the law firm. We won’t be able to go out in a while.”

“That’s amazing.” I’m excited for her. So excited.

I remember what it was like for me. The day my business started taking off was the day I could help my family in a way that matters. No more forcing them to call the Crisis Hotline for help. I could afford doctors. Medication. Professionals to look after them.

Getting the job of your dreams while moving toward being financially independent is incredible.

“Thanks, I hope so.” She sucks in a long breath. “So. Please? I haven’t had a fun night out in forever. Join us. Please.”

“Hey,” a man says next to her ear in a playful voice. Has to be Alden. “Our dates don’t count?”

“They do, babe. You get what I mean. With friends.”

Exactly. Friends.

“This isn’t a double date.” It’s crucial that I remind her of this. That she passes along the message to…who? I already forgot his name.

“Not a double date.” I imagine Ray nodding. “Fun night out. You’ll be home early. Swear.”

If that’s the case…okay. Great, even. Excitement bubbles inside me. I haven’t gone out with friends on a fun night out in forever, either. Actually, never. There were too many things to worry over. Not nearly enough money to spend. Rex wouldn’t allow it.

Today is a new day.

“Cool. So, where are we going?”

Ray rattles the address of the place. Says they’ll meet me there at eight.

Then the line goes dead. I drop the phone on the sink and brush my teeth before hopping into the shower.

I have to. My stomach is sticky with sweat, and so are my breasts.

Just goes to show how wrong it is for me to date. My focus is elsewhere instead of on work, where it should be.

No more men for me in the near future.

None. At. All.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Quinlan

REX: *Everything okay?*

Everything okay. Ha.

Two words are all I get from him after a full day of silence. He didn't text me last night. Hasn't called throughout the morning and the afternoon to apologize for his behavior.

Neither have I. Clearly.

"Everything okay" isn't an apology. I'm not going to let this slide. The way he went apeshit at Maeve's wasn't acceptable. I won't let him treat me like a child anymore. He can't think he has the right to choose a man for me.

He said he wanted me to get married, then he yelled at Rome to leave me alone? No, he can forget about that.

Years ago, I would've accepted his behavior. This outburst. Would've rationalized it, labeled it as grief.

Over the last twenty-four hours, I've decided that this is it. He could be overprotective. He could *suggest* that I don't go out with random guys I met on the street. That's fine. Hell, that's reasonable.

Making a scene and being inches from punching someone is where I draw the line.

We have to stop letting grief dictate our lives.

Losing Blake is a constant pain that I live with. I barely knew him—anyone barely knew him; he was so young at thirteen months—but it hurts. He was *ours*.

I'll never forget him. Neither of us will. We have to move forward, anyway. Keep him locked tight in our hearts and carry him with us while we find our happiness. While we find reasons to live.

As I near the cocktail bar where I'm supposed to meet Ray and the others, I feel hopeful. Hopeful about Rex's message, wishing he's gotten over himself. That this text he sends me will be a peace offering. That it'll end with him telling me he'll never do it again.

I don't answer him as I rush on my heels toward the bar. I'm late, so I'll have to answer him once I'm there. If I'm not paying attention, chances are I'll stumble over.

The only places I go to in heels are meetings, when I sit with my clients from Chicago. Every other day I'm either barefoot, in slippers or in sneakers.

Yeah, I'll definitely fall over if I type out a message while I'm walking. My black, midi dress will scrunch up my waist. The entire street will have a full view of my black panties.

I run my free hand over the keyhole neckline and the smooth fabric of my dress. I love this garment. I won't ruin it, or the leather jacket I have over it by being careless.

I won't embarrass myself out here where someone or some*ones* might be stalking me.

Rex will have to wait. I straighten my spine and roll my shoulders back. My long hair that I left down bounces on my back with every step. Smooth and straight after twenty minutes of ironing.

This is fun, this escapism. For a few hours, I'm not Quinlan Palmer. I'm not Rex's half-sister, not my parents' daughter. They're taken care of for tonight.

There are no men that get me all hot and bothered, then disappear.

I didn't lose a brother in a terrible tragedy. Not tonight.

I'm just another twenty-three-year-old, heading for a night out with her friends. Even if the only person I know there is Ray.

Determined, I throw the phone into my bag and march forward. The red and white sign of the cocktail bar gets closer with every step I take. In a minute, I'll be there. A little late, but…it is what it is.

“Ray Wilson?” I give her name to the host. “They’re supposed to be here.”

While he taps on the screen of his tablet, I twist my head to look inside, searching for her. The place is packed. So many patrons either sit on the bar, occupy low tables or booths or hang around, a drink in their hands. No wonder she had to make reservations.

Other than being full, the cocktail bar is gorgeous. Swanky. Elegant sphere light fixtures are spread around the restaurant, spreading dim light in the otherwise dark space. Cherry wood panels cover the floor and the walls.

The moment I recognize that “Love into a Weapon” by Madalen Duke plays over the speakers is when the host looks up at me.

“Yes, they’re here,” he reaffirms what I just said. “Follow me, please.”

Two steps inside after the light-haired host, and my phone vibrates in my bag. Again and again and again.

A call. It has to be Rex. He must be freaking out, to call instead of waiting for me to text him back.

I’m not going to be an asshole. I won’t screen his call. I’ll tell him I’m fine and hang up.

It’ll be over by the time I reach Ray. No one will ever realize I’m having family drama.

Just another twenty-three-year-old. That’s me.

“Rex.” Unlike this morning, I checked the caller ID. “What’s up?”

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?” I can hardly hear him over the music, pressing two fingers to my other ear.

“Where. Are. You?”

Being the object of Rex’s tantrums has conditioned me into flinching at his tough voice. He’s bigger. Louder. It doesn’t help that I’m guilty. After all, I’m the one who’s to blame for his grief.

But—no. I stop that snowball before it even starts rolling. I can’t keep blaming myself for everything. Can’t keep letting him treat me like this.

Instead of cowering from him, I lift my chin up, and square my shoulders.

I haven’t contacted him today for a reason. He doesn’t get to be rude, then call and make demands.

“I’m fine,” I raise my voice to be heard over the music. “I’m about to meet—”

The sentence dies a miserable death on my tongue. Scratch that, it's never made it that far. The words stuff my throat, choking me.

"Meet who?"

My friends, I want to say.

Except they aren't the only people I know here.

Mystery man is sitting on one of the low round tables. His lips curl into a wicked smirk when he notices me, his sapphire eyes glinting. His dark hair is styled in a perfectly messy sort of way. The casual navy suit he's wearing looks like it's been molded to his toned body.

And if it were only him here, that would've been fine. Manageable.

He isn't alone.

At his side, there's Liam, handsome as ever in a black suit. His hair falls on his forehead, his amber eyes boring into mine. With his forearms resting on the table, one of his hands holds his gold Zippo. My gaze is drawn to it when he flicks it open. When the flame flickers to life.

Two out of three.

False.

A third man is seated at their table with his back to me. My stomach swoops at his broad shoulders and familiar buzz cut, but it can't be.

"Quinlan, are you listening to me?" Rex, I think. More like a background noise.

It can't be Rome.

Liam and mystery man's focus on me must've tipped him off. Must've alerted him of me being here. He looks over his shoulder, glorious and dangerous in a dark blue suit to match his eyes.

Oh, fuck my life.

It is Rome.

He's fixated on me, ensnaring me in his gaze.

His jaw tics, the movement like a magnet, pulling my eyes to his lips. Lips that kissed me. That made my heart flutter and my pussy wet. It took me forever to catch my breath after he walked away.

I'm struggling to catch it now.

When I dreamed of the three of them together, it was nothing like this. In my fantasy, the walls didn't close in on me. I didn't freeze.

It wasn't so depraved and wrong to have all of them together.

Do they know each other? Do they know each of them met me?

“Quinlan.” A shout in my ear. “Quinlan, goddamn it, answer me! What’s going on?”

“I…” My tongue is heavy. My mind racing.

Run. Stay. Walk over there and confront them.

While I consider my options, they stare. Their eyes strip me of my clothes, of my common sense.

If I’d had any left, I would’ve used it to move along. I don’t. I stare back, my eyes dancing between the three of them.

A dumb move on my part. So, so dumb.

Mystery man cocks a curious eyebrow and my heart flutters. Rome runs his tongue along the top set of his lips, and I feel it between my legs. Liam dips his chin, and I’m soaked.

My nipples are so hard that I have to hug my jacket around me with one arm. I have to protect myself from them.

“I’m coming over there.” Rex’s shouting louder, sounding urgent. “I have the location of your phone. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

My rage, evidently, is a force. One I haven’t recognized within myself up until this moment. It breaks through my shock. Barrels through it.

“You have *what*, Rex?”

The irritated host motions for me to join him. I don’t. Another step, and I’ll be near the men’s table. It’s bad enough that Rome had to witness it yesterday. How he’d probably told the other two that I have a psycho brother. That I didn’t defend myself over there, not really.

This conversation with Rex isn’t one I’m having near them.

This is private.

“What did you think, that I’d let you out in the world and not watch over you?” Rex has the nerve to raise his voice at me. My fist clenches, crumpling my leather jacket. “You might disappear, and I’ll never see you again. I’m your big brother. That’s what big brothers do.”

His poor explanations aren’t comforting. I’m riled up, trying to smile while my insides are burning up.

“Brother? You’re a stalker, that’s what you are.”

A sharp hand gesture from the host indicates toward Ray’s booth in the far back. After that, he saunters past me in silence.

“Quinlan, it was an insurance policy.” He’s agitated. Well, fucking great, so am I. “Don’t you understand?”

“I understand that you’re controlling.” My brow furrows as I keep looking straight ahead. Directly at the three men in the booth six feet away. “That you’re tracking my location without my consent. I understand, Rex, that you’re out of line. I thought you called to tell me you’re sorry.”

As if he’s listening in on our conversation, mystery man’s eyes crinkle at the corners. His smirk widens, and he’s leaning forward. When he tilts his head, I’m already so pissed at Rex that I tilt mine back at him.

It lands me a shake of his head. Like he’s scolding me.

Like he might spank me.

Lord. I won’t think of what it does to my belly. To my swollen breasts. To the rope around my lungs.

I won’t.

“Go home, kid,” my half-brother says. Demands, actually. “This going out shit isn’t for you.”

“*This* isn’t for me.” I grind my teeth. The corner of Liam’s mouth tips to the side, taunting me. Not him too. “I had no idea you were manipulative, Rex. I don’t like it. This is the last time you’re doing this to me. I’m turning off my GPS.”

“This isn’t up to you—”

I’m not sure what’s changed about me, but I have. Maybe it’s the music. Maybe it’s this place.

Maybe it’s these three men who’ve tricked me.

Whatever it is, I’m a different woman. I’m done letting people walk all over me and pretend like I’m fine. Like it’s okay for them to treat me like this.

I’m so done.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Rex.” I seethe. “This isn’t up to *you*.”

Is Rome reading my lips? Seems like it. He gives me a brisk nod, his fierce expression lending me the strength I need to put an end to this discussion.

I shouldn’t rely on any of these three for anything. In fact, I dare any of them to try to talk to me when I end this call. They won’t know what hit them.

But I can use them. And I will. I pretend I’m as vicious as mystery man. As calm as Liam. As strong as Rome.

“If I see you here, Rex—if you try to take me home somehow—I’ll scream. Kidnapping is a punishable offense.”

“You can’t mean that.” He’s done yelling. Done threatening.

“Watch me.” My lungs expand and air filters in. “Someone will call the police. I’ll press charges.”

The humiliating night I spent over at a friend’s house in junior high resurfaces. Dad told Rex I was there in a moment of lucidity. He drove over there. Banged on my friend’s door. Dragged me home by my arm and left.

I didn’t go to school for a week after that; I was so embarrassed.

No more.

The men were only the strike of a match. My soul has been doused with gasoline for years.

With one click, I hang up on him. I turn off the GPS on my phone and shove the phone in my bag.

In the bar, it’s business as usual. Music continues to play around me. People talk, drink, laugh.

And yet…

Nothing’s the same.

Empowered. That’s what I feel.

That, and burning up.

The men keep staring at me, not an ounce of humor or depravity on their faces. Concern and fury harden their features. Eyes narrowed.

I yelled, I realize. And while the rest of the people close by are polite, acting as if they haven’t noticed me shouting at Rex, my three strangers do no such thing.

They make it a point to let me know my conversation was their business. That I’m their business.

Great. Just great. I hoped to avoid it, and look at me.

Humiliated all over again.

Rex has ruined my night with his psycho, controlling behavior. Has thrown me off balance.

The three men who stare at me aren’t any better. They’re here for me.

It’s crystal clear that this has been some kind of a ruse. Neither one of them is surprised that the others recognize me. They, like my half-brother, are stalkers.

Mystery man had me doubting myself when I accused him of it. He can’t gaslight me anymore. No one can.

My feet move on their own, one step after the other, toward the back of the bar. To my friends. I stride past the men, my head held high.

They don’t exist anymore. They won’t rattle me.

I’m here to have fun. No one, and I mean no one, will ruin this for me.

“Quinlan, there you are.” Ray jumps out of the booth as soon as I come into view.

Beautiful in a mini, dove-gray dress that hugs her curves, my neighbor is all smiles. She rushes to me on her three-inch heels, and though we don’t usually hug, I let her wrap her arms around me. After the last ten minutes, I need it. Desperate for it.

“I’m sorry for being late.” I pat her back, looking at the other two men in the booth. At their polite smiles.

This is safe, being around them. These friendly, kind people.

Unlike my stalkers.

“Nonsense. You shouldn’t have been running on these heels for us.” Oh, no. She’s probably referring to my racing heart. She mistakes my body’s reaction to the predators around me for something else. Something innocuous. “Let me introduce you to everyone.”

I force a smile on my face, apologizing again to the other men in our booth. They act like it’s no big thing, then Ray moves to stand next to one of the men.

“This is Alden, my boyfriend.”

“Hey.” The dark-haired, bulky man wraps his arm around her middle. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“This is Hugh.” She gestures to the man sitting across from Alden. A blond, lanky man.

“Nice to meet you, Quinlan,” he says over the music, scooting over for me to slide in next to him.

“Same here.” I put a hand over my chest, massaging it. Calming my racing heart. Doesn’t work. It can’t work when my stalkers are right there, behind me. When a sick part of me wants them. “Would you excuse me for a second?”

I’m already two steps toward the bathroom. I need to splash water on my face, calm the fuck down.

“Can I get you anything?” Hugh hands me over the menu.

“Thanks, I have it.” I wave it off, backing away from the group. “I’ll be a second. Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Alden reassures me.

Ray adds, “Are you okay? Do you need me there?”

They’re all so nice. So welcoming. Their kindness almost makes me feel like myself again. A few drops of water will do the rest of the job.

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Okay.” Her dark brown eyes are piercing. Searching for what’s wrong. She’ll make a great lawyer one day. “We’ll be here.”

“Thanks. Sorry.” I scurry into the bathroom, managing to stay on my heels without stumbling.

Two women walk out, and I slip past them inside, closing the bathroom door behind me. I lean on the sink, the ceramic cold beneath my fingers.

I bow my head down. Inhale. Exhale.

I’m safe. Nothing’s going to happen tonight.

Rex won’t come here after my threat.

The three men out there can’t be stalking me. I was sure of it for a minute there.

But—no, it can’t be. Being stalked and hunted down doesn’t happen to ordinary people. I’m as ordinary as they come. I have my own small business. My small family. I run four times a week, take the same route every single time.

If I do hang out somewhere, it’s at Maeve’s.

My gray eyes look back at me from the mirror. Ordinary. That’s what I am.

Stalking only happens in the movies.

My life isn’t a movie. I’m not some kind of a celebrity or someone worth stalking.

This has to be the world’s strangest coincidence. That’s it.

Right?

“Right,” I tell my reflection. “Fine. Perfect.” I wash my hands, the water icy cold refreshing on my skin. “I’ll go out there.” Soap. “Enjoy the rest of the evening.” More water. “Forget about everything and have fun.”

The last word isn’t a word. It’s a breath. A gasp.

I’m not alone in the restroom.

“There you are, darling.” Sapphire eyes stare at me from the mirror.

“Are you hiding from us?” Rome is right behind him.

Liam closes the door and flips the lock.

Run.

I should. I should. I should.

The three of them are tall, large and imposing. They fill the small space with darkness and in practiced movements. I spin to them, and they form a wall. Force me to the back of the room.

They close in on me in half a circle. Cornering me until my back hits the cold tiles behind me.

I hate that they smell good. I hate that their colognes infiltrate my senses. I hate that they confuse me.

I walked past them. I had this. Now I'm cornered?

"You need to go away. All three of you."

"I don't think so." Mystery man trails the pad of his finger along my cheek.

The hair at the back of my neck stands on end. My world turns upside down. My heart, that's only settled a second ago, is once again racing like it's an F1 driver.

This is bad. This is very bad.

I flinch at his touch instead of leaning into it like I want to.

"No." My nipples harden against my bra. My thighs clench. They turn me on. Fearing them turns me on. "Go away."

"We won't." Rome pats my head like I'm his pet.

"This can't be happening." I stare at him, raising my voice. Faking confidence. "You all don't know each other."

"We do, little flame." Liam wraps a hand around my throat, pulling me to his face. Controlling my airway.

"How?" I whisper.

"Sweetheart, *how* isn't the right question." Rome's in front of me, his rough knuckles stroking the side of my face. Then he flips his hand, grabbing my jaw and pulling me from Liam. "In fact, I'm pretty sure we've done enough talking over the last few days. What do you say, Damien?"

Rome cuts his gaze to mystery man—to Damien, who reaches behind me.

"Agreed." He grabs a fistful of my hair. I hiss at the pain when he tugs on it. It hurts so good. "Way too much talking. We're not here for that."

I shouldn't be curious. Except I am. "Then?"

"We're here to give you what you want."

"I don't want anything from you." Lies.

I've never been this attracted to anyone in my life. Ever. This wet. That desperate for an orgasm.

They see through my bullshit, too.

“You might not want us. Not at this very moment.” Damien leans in, his breath hot on my temple.

From this up close, his unhinged side shows. His eyes aren’t friendly. Cruelty lies behind them. How bottomless are they?

“But we are what you need.” He licks my tattoo and says the words that prove to me how spot on I am.

“Fuck you, psycho.”

He laughs, and I bite down the inside of my cheek to suppress a shudder. To silence the moan I’m barely holding inside.

“Oh, we will.” His lips kiss my temple, and there’s no hiding the shudders anymore. No swallowing the moan. “Some other night, we’ll fuck you. Tonight, we’ll settle for hearing you beg for it.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Liam

ALARM BELLS HAVE BEEN going off in my head since we got up from our table.

We're deviating from tonight's plan. Taking a hard turn to the right. Or left.

Whatever. It's a risky one. A worthy one.

When we left the apartment this evening, we had everything worked out.

We'd come here. Let her see us. Let the realization that we'd been conspiring against her—most likely as a group—sink in.

It was supposed to be a chance to scare her. Fear looks so hot on Quinlan.

Then there was the matter of crashing her not-double-date.

One look at the three of us together, and she should've rushed outside. If we got lucky, she would've called her half-brother on the way home, her voice quivering. He would've worried for real this time.

As we're cornering her in the cocktail bar's restrooms, I think it's safe to say our plan has failed. The second part, anyway.

She feared us, all right. Those minutes of recognition were priceless.

Her shouting at Rex over the phone? That was a million times better than having her crying for him.

It turned me right the fuck on. Her anger. The fire in her. Got me wondering how she'd react to us when the truth finally came out. She'll be a wildfire. Destroy herself with her fury.

But.

She didn’t leave. She was about to go sit with *them*.

Unacceptable.

“Fuck you, psycho.”

Such a pretty mess. That’s what we’ve turned her into. A panting, growling mess.

My pulse thrums in my ears. My scar is as hot as the day fire scalded my cheek.

For the first time in my life, I’m not choked by the stinging. By the memories. She does it. She makes me want to burn. With her. Jesus.

“Some other night, we’ll fuck you. Tonight, we’ll settle for hearing you beg for it,” Damien counters.

My hand is on her throat. Rome’s on her jaw. Damien tugs on her hair.

Quinlan’s there, standing proud despite being trapped. Wet beads prickle at the corners of her eyes. Blood rushes in her veins. Cheeks on fire.

And her gaze is furious. Like we’re the ones at a disadvantage here.

“Interesting.”

Gray eyes slice to mine. Last night, she was peaceful. Her eyelashes rested on her cheeks while we took advantage of her. There’s nothing peaceful about her anymore.

“What’s interesting?” Her voice is a furious hiss.

“You.” I’ll feel her better if I tighten my grip. So I do.

She gasps, the sound triggering a growl from Rome and a smirk from Damien.

Teasing from me. “Pretending you don’t want this. It’s interesting, since your body says otherwise.”

“You know each other.” An accusation. She’s accusing *me*.

Rome’s the one who kissed her, who got closer to her. And she points a finger at me.

That could only mean one thing. Quinlan has trusted me the most.

My cock jerks in my pants as if she’d just grazed it.

“We do.” I’m burning. Going up in flames in the best possible way. She’s doing this to me, turning the panic into need. Into hope. It’s too soon to let her have that power over me. “Tell me, Rome. Didn’t we just say talking time is over?”

“You were the one who said I was interesting.”

“We did.” On cue, Rome digs his fingers to her cheek.

That added pressure on her cheeks from Rome silences Quinlan. Her flawless skin blanches around his fingertips. A contrast against the red slashes on his knuckles.

“Stop it.”

“Still whispering,” Damien muses.

His lips haven’t moved from her cheek, and he yanks her head to him by her hair. Rome and I loosen our grips on her in tandem. Damien groans as he presses his mouth to her, forces her to stay while he sucks on her skin. On the tattooed heart.

She makes a voice at the back of her throat. I feel it. I feel her little moan that follows.

He releases her by some, his lips brushing her wet skin. “You need us to stay.”

“No.” Her resilience. It’s beautiful. “I don’t need you. Any of you.”

“Is that so?” Rome’s had enough. He pushes her harder up against the wall, and Damien and I move with them.

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember you fighting me yesterday.” Rome edges closer to Quinlan. Their noses brush. His lips caress hers. “You moaned into my mouth, sweetheart. Your tank top did a poor job of hiding the little peaks of your nipples.”

Her *nipples*. I groan at the memory from last night. They’re branded into my memory. Soft and hard. Pink and responsive. I loathe her dress and leather jacket. Loathe them. They’re an obstacle. A wall that needs to be torn down.

“They weren’t—I wasn’t—” She’s frustrated. Adorable. “You tricked me.”

I release her throat to go for the offending jacket. Yank it off one of her shoulders.

“What’s wrong with tricking you?” Damien pushes down the other.

The wall isn’t an obstacle to either one of us as we wrangle her jacket off her until it falls to the floor.

“Everything.”

“Like lying is wrong?” Rome asks.

“Stop it,” she mumbles. Doesn’t fight us. Doesn’t resist. Just mumbles and watches the three of us.

“You’re right, Rome. She’s lying.” Damien’s eyes rake over her body, his knuckles tracing the spot he sucked on. “Would you have screamed if you knew who Rome was?”

“What, a stalker? A manipulative asshole?” She’s breathing hard, eyes accusing us. All of us. “You can bet your ass I would.”

“Oh, little flame. Look at you, hiding how badly you need us.” My fingers curl on the underside of her breast, relishing in the weight of it in my palm. She stays still, letting me brush my thumb on her nipple. “There’s no shame in wanting to be fucked. Craving three men instead of one. You can tell us how wet you are. How your panties are ruined. Or we can see for ourselves.”

I’m being cruel. I’m searching for consent. A sliver of it.

We won’t be the cause Quinlan disintegrates into nothing.

“We could take care of that for you.” Damien turns on the charm. Only her eyes slide to him, since Rome’s hold on her is relentless. “We’ll stretch all your holes, darling. Make you cry. You’ll be our whore, and you’ll love it, won’t you?”

“You wish, asshole,” she snarls, infuriated and visibly turned on. A bright shade of red creeps on her cheeks. “I’m no one’s whore.”

“Anyone else…” Damien trails his hand up her arm until his hand mirrors mine, cupping the underside of Quinlan’s other breast. “Any other liar—”

“Not. A. Liar,” she cuts him off.

Her heart beats against my palm. Pupils dilate. Goosebumps rake up her arms.

“You’re beautiful when you lie.” Rome presses a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “You get me so hard. You want me to lose control? Is that it? You’re that desperate to be filled?”

“No, I…” The rest of the sentence is nothing but air.

“Say it,” I repeat, louder than I would’ve liked. Louder than I’m used to. “Tell us you want us to touch you, or we’ll check ourselves. We won’t be gentle about it, either.”

“We’ll tear your dress off you.” Rome slides his hand lower. Hooks his fingers in the keyhole neckline of her dress for emphasis. “You’ll walk out of here naked. Too bad your miserable date will have any idea what to do with you.”

“Not my date.”

“With tears streaking your cheeks.” Damien nudges my thumb with his, telling me he’s running out of patience. “Filthy with our cum on your mouth. Cheeks. Breasts. That’s how you’re going to get out there if you keep lying, darling.”

Her body shivers. She likes the idea. Curious.

“I will never be your whore.”

“What would you call this”—I flick my thumb, brushing her hardened nipple, and I fucking groan—“if not our whore?”

“I don’t belong to you.” The challenge in her voice matches that in her large, gray eyes. “I’m my own person. I’m not yours anything. If you want to touch me tonight, though…”

Her voice trails. Silence ensues. Her body pulses with desire. With the need to say words I assume she hasn’t told anyone before us. Much less to her loser of an ex.

“Yes?” Damien torments Quinlan by pinching her nipple.

“You can…” Her groan. I could swallow it up. Swear off food and just live from her groans.

The slightest shove of Rome’s shoulder, and my lips crush onto Quinlan’s. She groans again, *for me*. This isn’t frustration. This is lust. She’s wide awake, fighting me. Wanting me.

“Please.” Her hand is on my scar. The slightest brush of her gentle fingers to the damaged tissues.

I’m letting her do it. I never let anyone touch me there. Never let anyone get close.

I let her.

And fuck me, it doesn’t hurt. Doesn’t bring back memories. No flashbacks follow the whisper of her fingertips on my cheek.

None of it.

“Please.” Louder. She’s louder, goddamn it. I can’t think straight.

“Let’s try the truth this time. Were you wet for me?” Rome releases her face, bunching her dress up her hips. “When I took your mouth in the middle of the street? When your soft, fuckable body was in my arms?”

“I—” she starts. I tear myself from her, shoving her face so she’s facing Damien. He kisses her, his hand sinking in her hair.

“You lied to me,” she murmurs between kissing Damien and gasping for air. “You’re a bastard. All of you are.”

“Pretty little thing.” Rome’s hand disappears beneath the thick fabric of Quinlan’s dress. I pull her leg to the side, giving him access to her sweet, perfect pussy. “You know what I think?”

“Don’t care.” We can barely hear her.

Kind of hard to speak when Damien lowers his mouth to her nipple. It closes over the fabric, biting. Rome pumps his fingers in and out of her virgin pussy. Which she is. A virgin, that is. Her medical records say that.

There’s so much I want to do to her. Tease, seduce. Carry a flame to her face like last night.

The restroom isn’t the place for this.

When I use my Zippo on her, she’ll be awake for it. It’ll be special.

“I think you were wet then.” Rome removes his fingers, holding it between them. “Same as you are now.”

His fingers glisten. Slick with her arousal.

“Proud of yourself?” Regardless of how breathless she is, Quinlan manages to quirk an eyebrow at Rome. Manages to spit fire at him. At the three of us. “My body reacted. I didn’t want it. I don’t.”

I’m going to fuck the sass out of her mouth. I’m going to—

“One day, I’ll have my cock so deep down your throat…” Rome doesn’t hear me, yet here he is, finishing my sentence. “So deep, you’ll gag. And guess what? That’ll make you wet, too.”

“Never.” Watching her flush darken sends me over the edge. My restraint snaps.

Just like fucking that.

“Sweet little virgin.” My fingers curl around her wrist, yanking her palm to my throbbing cock. “Keep talking back. If that’s what you’re after”—I squeeze her palm over me—“you got it.”

Her eyebrows shoot down. “How do you know I’m a virgin?”

“Educated guess.” With my free hand, I twist her face to Rome. “Look at him. Sucking on his fingers. On you.”

She sucks in a breath. Loses all ability to talk. She doesn’t need to. We’re here to do everything for her.

Rome pulls his fingers out with a pop, smearing his spit and her arousal on her left cheek, then the right.

“I bet you’re wondering…”

Her hand, not her, starts stroking me while I talk.

Quinlan herself, she might not want it.

Her body does.

It takes every ounce of self-control not to tear her from my friends' grip, bend her over and fuck her against the wall. Take her pussy. Her ass. Own her.

"Wondering what?" Oh, how things changed. I was wrong to think she doesn't want us. She does. Her question gives her away. Her question makes her cheeks flush.

"What choking on my friend would be like." I keep her eyes on him. "I bet you're soaking for it."

"She is." Damien licks her arousal and Rome's spit off one cheek. I taste the other one while Rome presses a thumb into her mouth. Uses her own spit to wet her lips.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I thought I was clear. Give you what you need." Damien rises, staring her down. "Make you come. For us."

The knob on the door rattles. Rattles harder. A banging on the door comes next. "Anyone in there?"

"Occupied," I snap.

"Quinlan, it's Hugh."

Rome presses his palm to her lips.

"My friend is in there and I'm worried." Delusional. He's been around her for less than a minute and already calls her his friend.

No doubt the fucker believes she could be more than that.

She's not his.

Never will be.

Ours.

"Ten minutes," Rome thunders. His eyes are narrowed. A storm brews behind them as he glowers at Quinlan. "You come back sooner than that and you're a dead man."

"Excuse me?"

Quinlan tries to peel Rome's hand off her. But she isn't resisting, not really. Her other hand runs up and down my length. Squeezing me. Silently communicating that yes, she wants this. Yes, she likes it when I rock my hips into her touch.

She won't call for help. She's all in. I place a hand over Rome, and it's enough for him to lower it.

“They’ll worry about me,” she whispers, still stroking me. Such a good girl. “They’ll have someone break in the door. I… I want to be here, okay? Fuck. Here, you have what you wanted. But they won’t let us stay if they don’t hear from me.”

“Just like I thought.” Damien huffs a laugh. An impressed one. “Begging us to stay.”

“It’s not worth the risk,” I lie. Taunting her. Being with her is worth everything. I’m surprised by how much I’m willing to sacrifice to be with her. “Maybe we should leave.”

“Liam, please.” She’s almost crying. Saying my name with my cock in her hand, edging closer to me. “Stay.”

“Tell them you’re okay and I might.”

“I’m okay,” she shouts.

“Quinlan?”

“Go away. Please. I’m sorry.”

The pounding on the door stops.

“You’re staying, then?”

I shrug. Her pain is too delicious to pass up on.

“Touch me.” Gray watery eyes turn to Rome. “Touch me there again. Please.”

This is obviously hard for her. Begging. It’s beautiful.

His nostrils flare. “There where? Say it.”

Fire. It crackles behind her eyes. And she’s trembling. A ball of need and desire so repressed, detonating inside her.

If we’re not quick about whatever it is we want to do to her, we’d be swallowed up in the explosion. We’ll fuck her here for hours. Security can barge in. The police. Fire department.

We’ll be here anyway. Fucking her brains out until we’re spent and then some.

I should do something about it. Give her an unsatisfying orgasm. Anything to get her off and leave her a mess for her brother to see. Just until we have her for ourselves.

I could never.

“Use your words.” Since he’s kept the skirt of her dress bunched up this entire time, I can see his fingers trailing along the side of her panties. Never really touching where she needs him.

“Please.” She grips his cheek. “Touch my pussy. Make me feel good.”

“Say you’re our little whore and I will.”

“Damien.” Her last resort. The one she thinks is…what? Sweeter? More easy-going? No. She doesn’t believe that. The tremor in her chin is a dead giveaway that she sees through him. “I need… I need it so bad. Please.”

“Ours,” he hisses, then does what I wanted to. Steals her from Rome and me and into his arms. “You’re ours.”

“You’re manipulating me.” A crystal drop slides down Quinlan’s flushed cheek.

“We are.” That, and so much more. Damien manhandles her so she’s facing away from us. Presses her cheek to the wall. “Stay there. Be our good little girl and don’t move.”

“Whatever you do, don’t scream.” I toss the skirt of her dress up her waist.

Rome and Damien each have a hand on her hips, yanking on them until the upper part of her body is parallel to the floor. Shoving her panties down to her knees.

“Why would I sc—”

As soon as her panties are out of the way, Damien’s palm cracks on her ass. Then she does exactly what I told her not to.

She screams.

“What’s this?” My hand is on her cheek, gripping her. “I said be quiet.”

“It hurts.” Watery eyes slip from me to the men behind her. I follow her gaze.

Rome raises his hand. I’m quick to look at her face, to not miss a second of her pain.

One, two, three times, his hand lands on her ass.

Her forehead scrunches. Her body squirms beneath our hold. “Stop. Stop.”

He adds another three. Four.

“Stop making you feel good?” Five.

“Oh my God, no.”

Damien pushes her legs to the sides, spreading her for him. Baring her pussy to him.

“Darling, lying again?” By the glint in his sapphire eyes, she’s even wetter than before.

“No.” She wiggles, trying to get out of my hold. “I’m not lying.”

“Little flame.” My voice is a warning. My fingers find one of her nipples, twisting, tugging, pulling. I catch her scream with my palm. “We’re beyond asking for your consent.”

Damien drops to his knees, darts his tongue out, and buries his face in her pussy.

Fuck, it’s beautiful. She moans so beautifully into my palm.

I’m so hard I could die.

“How’s our little liar?” Rome’s fingers bite into Quinlan’s flesh, bruising her.

“Soaking,” Damien groans. He’s back to licking her, making her tremble and arch her back.

Her eyes flutter, her breath hot on my skin.

I want to remove my hand and shove my cock there. Christ, it hurts how much I want her.

Nothing has ever come close to this. Nights of jerking off to her. Hours of fucking my hand in the shower. I even put hot wax to my skin, imagining I was doing it to her. This, right here, is a million times better than that.

Rome stares at Damien. He shakes his head, tilting it to gaze at her. “Quinlan, what’s this? You’re enjoying Damien licking your cunt? Sucking you?”

She whimpers, sound straight to my balls.

“Oh, I see what’s going on. You’re humiliated.” His hand strokes the curve of her ass. I pinch her nipple harder, preparing her for what’s to come. “Can’t believe you have my friend eating you out in a restroom. That you’re going to come like that.”

Yes. That’s what the desperate sound coming out of her means.

Slap. That’s the sound Rome makes when his hand cracks on Quinlan’s red ass.

“Good girl.” He spanks her over and over, hurting her as if he’s punishing her. “Such a good little girl. Take it. Come on Damien’s mouth.”

“Your humiliation is so sweet, little flame.” I’m losing my mind, watching them pleasuring her. Taking her. “You love the pain. Come for him.”

She’s still crying when she pushes her hips into Damien’s face. While Rome continues to paint her ass red with his palm.

She does it until she’s screaming for us. Coming for us.

Quinlan trusts us enough to let go. Enough to climax around three people who are basically strangers.

“Don’t hold back. Let us see you, sweetheart. Let us hear you.” Rome is stroking the skin he’s bruised. I’m being gentle on the nipple I tortured, messing further with Quinlan’s head. “Be our filthy little girl in this filthy bathroom.”

She does, moaning and crying out and giving us her everything. Such a good little one.

Then the knob on the door rattles. “Quinlan!”

“Come on.” I adjust her panties. Help her stand straight after Damien rises to his feet.

Her tears have dried, though she hasn’t come down from her high. The pain, confusion, and shock haven’t left her face. Her body too, I bet.

We should leave her here. Distraught. Untethered.

Ray would take care of our Quinlan until we can. She’s trustworthy. At least that’s what her background check showed.

She’ll look after our messed-up little doll until we’ll take her.

No.

Fuck Ray. Fuck Rex.

I trust no one. Even if it means she won’t go to her half-brother looking like this. She needs to be home. We need to see to it that she gets there.

Us.

“You’re so good, darling.” Damien smooths over her dress while Rome picks her jacket off the floor. “Our good little whore.”

Quinlan scoffs. “I told you, I’m not your anything.”

I spread her arms to the sides, helping Rome slide his dark blue jacket on her. She frowns when she realizes it isn’t hers. She doesn’t say a word.

Even when she twists her head to see he’s folding her jacket and pinning it between his arm and his body. Stealing it from her.

He makes me wish I would’ve ripped her panties off her.

“Come here.” Damien tucks her under his arm and unlocks the restroom door.

“Quinlan, are you okay?” A worried Ray meets us. Her boyfriend and Hugh are there as well. Her eyes are wide, cheeks pale. “Who are these people?”

The music and Ray’s face must sober Quinlan up. She might apologize.

Never.

The three of us push the others back and guide her outside the restroom. We flank her, and Quinlan tilts her head toward me.

Me.

She glowers at me.

As if I'm not fucking hard enough as it is. As if I'm not drowning in desire, she's glowering at me for the scene we made. I stop, giving her a chance to explain.

"I don't—" She looks over her shoulder, about to say she doesn't know us.

I grip her chin, shaking my head. It's a subtle movement. A silent warning.

She gets it. "People. They're people."

Brat.

"Quinlan's feeling unwell." Damien aims his lawyer's smirk at the group behind us. "We're taking her home."

At this, Quinlan sighs. She's relieved. We're her saviors.

She needs us so bad. Poor thing, she has no idea.

It'll be long before she accepts it.

I can't wait for more of her fights until then.

"I'll take her." Ray insists. I appreciate that.

Rome, not so much. "No."

His eyes travel to the food waiting on the table of the group's booth. When he realizes Quinlan hasn't eaten this evening, his jaw tics. A curse rushes past his lips.

"Quinlan." Ray approaches, examining Quinlan's eyes. "You sure you want to go home with them?"

"My home," Quinlan clarifies, to us more than to her friend. "And yes. I'm sorry, Ray, for all of this."

"As long as you're okay…"

Damien's already pulling Quinlan away to the front door.

"I'm fine," she reassures Ray. "Talk soon."

I linger behind for a moment, reveling in the indignant expression on Hugh's face. Like I mentioned, delusional.

Outside, Rome eyes the Uber that's waiting outside. Dame catches the movement, helping Quinlan inside.

Meanwhile, I bury my hand in my pocket. Take out my Zippo.

Flick.

“What now?” Quinlan asks before Damien closes the door.

“Something troubling you, sweetheart?” A smile snakes up on Rome’s face. “Already begging to see us again?”

Her bottom lip juts out. “No.”

Snap. Flick. Snap. “We will anyway.”

“No, you won’t.” Her attention is divided between the flame and my face. “This was the last time any of you tricked me.”

“Of course, darling.” Damien is gentle when he shuts the door. He bends so he’s face-to-face with her through the open window. “I’m sure you’ll hate us tonight too,” he whispers. “When you rub one off, imagining it’s my tongue.”

Her shocked gasp is silenced by the sound of Damien’s hand as he slaps the top of the car twice, signaling the driver he’s free to go. Which he does.

As do we. We get into Damien’s SUV, track the Uber driver, and make sure Quinlan gets home safely.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Quinlan

“MS. PALMER.” TATUM, THE secretary at BLF Capital, smiles at me.

She sits behind her wide, wood desk, her green eyes kind. The three offices surrounding her desk are empty. There are no name tags on the closed doors. But I know whose offices they are.

At least their titles. The VPs of BLF Capital.

Their current website didn’t have the VPs’ names on it. Or the owners’. Or anyone in the company, for that matter. I hate coming off as if I don’t care about my job. About the people who work there.

I’ve had no other choice. No one’s given me their names.

I’ll have them soon enough. They’ve been on a business conference call —as Tatum’s informed me—before our meeting. The one I’ve been dreading.

This might’ve been easier if not for what happened two nights ago. The night the three men that had haunted my dreams admitted to stalking me. The night the three of them cornered me. Terrified me.

Made me come.

And fucked me in the head.

Ray has called me twice since. I let the calls go to voicemail and texted her later, letting her know I’m alive. And busy. And sorry. So sorry.

Though nothing I could say would excuse my behavior.

Rex and I spoke once since, and I hung up on him when my voice cracked. Fast. He sent a million messages later. I ignored most of them.

Running didn't happen, either. I couldn't bear the thought of bumping into anyone, anyone at all.

Instead, I drowned myself in work and marketing my business, hoping to forget about the dangerous strangers and how I embarrassed myself in a public restroom.

For the most part, I managed.

I'm here, aren't I? In this nice gray blouse, black slacks, and my heels. My hair is pulled back in a ponytail, my makeup is on point. I shouldn't be nervous.

"Ms. Palmer, are you all right?"

Except I am. The job is mine, but I'm sure they have a loophole in case I fuck up royally. Or a team of lawyers to null the agreement for any number of reasons.

"Yes." Spine straight. Shoulders pulled back. I definitely don't pull the collar of my shirt to get some air in.

Not me. I clutch on to the notebook and pen I've been provided with by Tatum when I arrived. Anything but fidget.

I have to believe this job is mine. That nothing that happened outside these offices reflects on me in any way. I am not a mess. I don't belong to three ridiculously hot men.

I'm me. The professional they hired to work on their website.

"Everything's great."

"Good." She's elegant as she rises from her chair. Her blonde hair is twisted into a low bun, her striped dress shirt tucked into her black pencil skirt. "In that case, they're ready to see you."

The offices are beautiful. A lot of money was invested into this place. I get up, watching the night sky outside. Inhaling. I'm fine.

Tatum walks over to me in her heels. "If you could follow me, please."

"Um, Tatum?" She's quick, setting off toward the conference room with me at her side. "Is there—Are there any topics I should avoid?"

She stops at my question. We're in the middle of a vast hallway, surrounded by glass walls and buzzing sounds of people talking over the phone and typing. The place is a hive.

Tatum is silent, though.

“There is, actually.” Her voice is a conspiratorial whisper. “I assume you remember you signed an NDA. You can’t talk about anything that goes on within these walls. They value their privacy.”

“Of course. I would never.” I have never either. My clients’ information is just that. Theirs.

“Good.” She sucks another deep breath, leaning toward me.

By her expression, it’s clear she’s uncomfortable with the invasion of my personal space as much as I am. This means what she has to tell me is important. A secret.

“And?”

“Not that I think anything of it. Truth is, I hardly even notice it’s there. Some people, though…” She shakes her head, disgusted. “Mr. Frost’s face is a sensitive topic. Don’t look at him too hard, even if he’s the one talking to you. He wouldn’t admit it, but I’ve been here long enough to know it upsets him.”

Ice floods my veins. My heart halts to a full stop.

“Disgusted by my scar, aren’t you?”

Liam’s words. Liam’s pain.

Impossible. It can’t be him.

When Damien had his tongue in my pussy, when Rome branded my ass with his hand… When Liam shut me up using one hand while the other abused my nipple until pain became earth-shattering pleasure…

That wasn’t some kind of a sick initiation to this job. I refuse to believe it.

They can’t be that twisted.

Can they?

“No looking too hard at Mr. Frost.” Fuck these thoughts. Fuck this fear. “Got it.”

I focus on Tatum, on the doors at the end of the hallway. They’re there. My future lies behind them. A way to support my family, not kinky, attractive men.

Tatum walks me a few steps forward, steeling herself at the large double dark wood doors at the end of the hall. They look bigger this close. Intimidating.

“I’d wish you good luck, but you don’t need it.” Tatum places a warm hand on my shoulder. A cordial gesture. One second, and it’s gone. “The job is yours.”

“Yes.”

Every ounce of my focus is on the door. All my energies are harnessed to transform me into the best version of myself. The woman who's worked for years to earn this position.

I plaster a smile on my face. "It's mine."

"That's the spirit," the older woman says. I hear her heels clink as she strides off.

Um…What? She's going?

Normally, especially in the fancier companies I've worked with, the secretaries show me in. A formal introduction takes place. A ritual of sorts. They bring in drinks. Refreshments.

This is a good thing. They're not snobs. You're going to meet some really cool people. You'll love working for them.

I will. Of course, I will.

The notebook goes to one hand. The freed one rises, curling into a fist.

Three raps on the door.

"Come in, Ms. Palmer," a man's bass-like voice seeps through the heavy doors.

Big smile. Hand on the handle.

And push.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Quinlan

“HELLO,” I SAY AT first to the blurry faces.

I’m nervous. My whole body is wound up tight. In the state I’m in, I only see shadows where the three men sit on the other side of the oval table. I can also tell it’s made of glass.

Nothing else.

Five seconds of silence. I blink, focusing on their faces instead their silhouettes, and then—

My smile falters. My throat is clogged.

No.

Them. The three of them.

Liam. Damien. Rome.

No. No, no, no. This isn’t happening.

I’d yell at them if I could force my mouth to work. Would turn on my heels and get the hell out of here, except my feet won’t cooperate.

“Hello, darling.” Damien sits between the two of them, steepling his fingers on the top of the table.

He’s donning a charcoal gray suit. His stubble is cut close to his jaw. His hair perfectly styled, arranged sort of messily, even here. Even in the office. He’s breathtaking, and I hate him for it.

“Close the door behind you, sweetheart.” Rome’s voice startles me, and I jump, my hand flying to my chest.

He, too, is gorgeous. The color of his gray suit accentuates his stormy eyes. His stubble is a tad thicker than Damien's; I see that better now in the light of day. The color is lighter, much like Rome's hair.

And his command doesn't change a damn thing. I still can't move.

"Terrified little flame." Liam pushes his chair back, rising to his full intimidating height.

His light gray suit moves with his lean body as he rounds the table. Approaches me.

Deep breath. Deep breath. Deep breath.

Nothing. I have nothing going for me but my roaring pulse. Nothing but panic clutches on to my lungs.

"Let me help you with that." Instead of sidestepping me, Liam stands right there, before me. Crowds my space.

He smells fresh. Clean. The smoke from the first time we met isn't there.

He's just as intimidating. By the look in his amber eyes, he knows he is.

He raises his arm over my head, and—

Click.

The door closes.

Liam remains there, his hand sliding toward my cheek. So close that I feel the fire beneath his fingertips. It burns hotter when he brushes my cheek.

My tattoo.

My memory. The one they treat as if it were theirs. Just like they toy with me and my parents' financial security as if it was nothing but a kinky joke.

Fuck them.

"What the hell's going on here?" I scowl at him. "What are you doing here?"

A second or an eternity passes. Time has no meaning when he's studying me like this. He tilts his head, as though he's excavating my soul out of me. Out of the ruins.

I'm not giving him anything willingly. A wall goes up behind my eyes. I've done this before, hundreds of times. I can and will do it again.

Moreover, I won't let him catch me looking at his scar. He won't hear me saying it's beautiful ever again.

"This is just another way to manipulate me." Fuck, my voice breaks. My nerves are shot. I'm upset. I'm furious. I'm confused. "And…"

I'm scared.

“And what, Quinlan?” Liam’s voice runs deep. As deep as his gaze, despite my best attempts to block him out. “What are you going to do?”

It’s my turn to be silent. There are vowels and consonants swimming in my mouth. Tapping on my tongue. They’re there. All I have to do is reach out for them and turn them into words.

But my tongue is too heavy. I’m too fucking pissed.

“Liam, do we really need her answer?” Rome. Harsh, unforgiving Rome. The man who spanked me so hard that I still feel his palm on me.

“No.” Liam walks backward, giving me one final look, then spins on his heel. Prowls back to his seat next to Damien and lowers himself into it.

“We don’t need her answer.” He cocks an eyebrow. “She needs to listen.”

“*She* is here.”

Finally, with them at a safe distance, I can finally breathe. My tongue works. My lungs function. Anger fuels my sense of righteousness. They can’t do this to me.

The gravity of my situation has sunken in, all right.

Had I had any other alternative, another source of income that would provide my parents the medical care they so desperately need, I would’ve walked away.

I would’ve packed my desire and humiliation. Lock them where the rest of my worst memories are buried. It’d suck, losing these three men. Then again, they were never mine.

Except I don’t have anything else going for me. Nothing as lucrative as this position.

My heart aches.

With the income I stand to make here, my parents’ situation could improve. They’d call me once in a while, maybe. Pick up the phone more often. They’d smile when I came to visit them. Mom wouldn’t stare at an old family photo for hours. Someone would be looking after them.

“She,” I emphasize the word obnoxiously. I might have to be here. Doesn’t mean I have to like it. “Demands to meet the people who hired her. The real VPs or owners or whatever of this company.”

“You’re looking at them. We’re the heads of the company. And the owners.” Damien motions for the chair directly in front of him. “Have a seat.”

“I won’t.” My body breaks out in furious shivers. I clench my teeth. “The other night was an initiation, wasn’t it? You’re a bunch of sick fucks. The

three of you.”

“Quite an idea, isn’t it?” Damien’s smirk comes off as genuine. For a flitting moment, and that’s it. His evil side shows in a second.

He’s enjoying this.

Liam and Rome nod. Once. Like they’re too good to offer me any explanation.

I’m going to kill them. All of them.

“Sit, darling.” The charm pours from Damien in waves. A sweet poison.

I almost drown in it. Damn near suffocate on how tempting he is.

Back in the restroom, I lost myself to them.

We aren’t in the restroom, though. There’s no orgasm on the table.

What *is* there on the table?

“Answer my question first.” I take a step toward them. Throw the notebook and pen on the table, my hands balling into fists.

On the outside, I’m standing tall, towering over them. On the inside, I’m on my knees. I’m nowhere near as powerful as they are. I’m at a physical disadvantage, and everyone in the room knows it.

At least the personal reasons for me being here are all mine.

Although…

I force another shiver away.

They’re stalkers. They might know everything about me.

“The other night wasn’t an initiation.” Damien’s sapphire eyes dance from my face to the chair in front of him.

This, I realize, is my only remaining option. The only way they’ll get this meeting over with. Let me go home, where I could work in peace. I’ll have space to forget how dumb I feel right now.

Huffing, I sit down. Tatum has my bag, so I’m pretty fucked if I have to make a run for it. My keys are there.

Rex has a spare. I’ll walk over to Maeve’s.

Okay. No panicking. I’ve got this.

Damien leans forward, both hands on the table. “That’s better.”

“Fuck your approval.” All those years of letting Rex walk over me come back with a vengeance. “What do you want?”

“What *we* want.” The alluring curve of his lips does things to me. Against my wishes, much like that day in the cocktail bar, wetness pools between my legs. I’m instantly drawn to him. “Is to discuss the terms of your employment.”

“The ones you won’t find in your contract,” Rome says.

I shake away the lust, whipping my head at him. “I won’t do anything I didn’t sign up for. You can’t make me.”

“Remember what I told you at the bar?” Damien’s teasing is a trap. A honeytrap.

“No.” Yes. I do remember, goddamn it.

“You’re ours,” Liam says, as if I needed the reminder.

As if I haven’t been replaying every second of last night in my head throughout the day.

My arousal.

My fear.

How I didn’t want them touching me after I’d discovered they’d tricked me.

How I didn’t care they lied and wanted them all over me.

For one night, I was desperate for them. For one night, I ached to have my freedom.

I wasn’t supposed to meet them ever again. Wanted to, sure. But they were way too intense for me. They were a lot for my heart and mind to handle separately. I couldn’t sustain a relationship with the three of them together.

Yet here they are. My new bosses.

“I’m your employee.” A Hail Mary. Something to stop them from turning me into their sex slave.

Because that’s what this is, right? The clause that couldn’t be on the signed contract.

After last night, I’m positive that this is it.

“It’s illegal, what you’re doing.”

“That’s only half-true.” Damien bares his teeth in a grin. A terrifying grin.

“The other side of the coin is…” The anger in Rome has melted. In its place, there’s wicked satisfaction. “As of today, you’re our property.”

At that, I laugh. I sound cynical. So unlike myself. That’s how ridiculous Rome’s statement was. Somehow, being a sex slave makes more sense to me than being a property.

What does that even mean?

“You have got to be joking.”

Flick.

As if summoned, I'm drawn to Liam's hand. To the red, orange and blue flame. His gold Zippo.

"Afraid not." *Snap* and the flame is gone. "You're our property. You'll be moving into our home."

Another *fuck you* sits on the tip of my tongue. *Who do you think you are?* too.

Except I could be pushing it. I could lose this job if I said those things.

Damn it.

"You won't have contact with the outside world," Rome deadpans. His expression is serious. His tone is flat. "Unless it's your clients, parents or anyone else we approve of. No new clients, by the way. That's off the table. Your old phone? It's no longer yours. You'll have a new one with our numbers. A laptop with encrypted emails. That's all you'll have."

"You hired me to be a web designer." I flatten my hands on the table. I'm aware I have to tamp down the rage. Find a middle ground so I won't get thrown out of here. So I lower my voice. "My body isn't for you to use."

After what I let them do to me—after how I enjoyed it—my refusal sounds pathetic.

That's what I am. Pathetic.

A burning sensation starts at the base of my throat and spreads up, up, up. My cheeks light aflame.

I need them to touch me. I need them to go to hell.

"Yes, it is." Rome cracks his neck.

"You don't get to decide on that." One hand rises, and I slam it on the table, much like Rex had on a number of tantrums. "I do."

"We're way past that, darling." Damien doesn't flinch. In fact, my tantrum only fuels him. I'm entertaining the bastard. "We were past that the second you agreed to take this job."

"Before that," Liam says in a low voice, his expression unreadable.

"Before that?" My throat tightens. My mouth goes dry. Oh *no*. I was right. Three men. Three hot, cruel, and awful men have been stalking me. For how long? Doesn't matter. Shouldn't matter. Just like I shouldn't be turned-on. Except it does matter. Except I am turned on. Fuck. "Since when?"

I rub at my forehead, pissed at myself. This isn't what I really want to ask, though, is it?

What I have to know is why.

Why have they been stalking me? Seducing me? Why am I here?

The questions remain firmly lodged in my throat. I know why.

I'm scared. There's no doubt in my mind that the answers would destroy me. And I need my shit together to survive this.

"Quinlan, you have it all fucking wrong if you think we owe you anything. Answers included." Rome rolls his shoulders. Draws them forward as he leans on his forearms, obviously enjoying my fear. My anger. "But I'll indulge you this once. We own you. No, we didn't have that clause in your contract. Yes, you still very much belong to us. The compensation we offer you should make up for your…inconvenience. It's more than enough to pay for your parents' medical bills. And isn't that why you're here?"

Hearing how much they've actually learned about me is suffocating. It's a hand on my mouth, a force silencing my moans. A palm turning my ass red and sore. Teeth clamping on my inner thigh.

These three men have always shown me their true colors. In the street. In the bathroom. Here, in their pristine conference room.

But unlike them, I never had the full picture. I couldn't connect the dots.

Now, when it's too late, I can. Now it hurts.

Now they have me with my back against the wall.

Shut up, I mouth. I can't yell it. Can't scream it.

Wish I could. Can't.

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up."

"That's where most of your income goes to." Damien finishes Rome's threat. "Providing for your parents. But it's not enough. You need us. You'll do as we say."

My nails dig into the inside of my palms. My pepper spray is in my bag. Rex made me carry it with me everywhere. And I don't have it on me. Tatum does.

Not like it matters. Not like I would use it on these men.

This is the job I've been waiting for.

My parents. It's my fault they are the way they are. I did this. I'm in charge of fixing it. Even Rex said so one time, when he was drunk.

"Why me?" I repeat the question I asked them in the restroom.

"Is that a *yes*?" Damien's tongue swipes seductively at the top row of his teeth.

He inches closer. A table separates us, yet I feel him on me anyway. I feel that tongue between my thighs. His lips on my sensitive skin. I shudder. Lean toward him against my better judgment.

Who am I kidding? What better judgment?

I'm attracted to these monsters. I need their comfort to help with the emotional pain they're inflicting. How fucked-up is that. How wrong.

"Tell me." Stupid curiosity. Stupid desire. Stupid tremors. "Why me?"

"You won't be going back to your apartment tonight," Liam interjects. A done deal, that's what his decisive voice says. "You'll be riding with Damien back to our penthouse. Effective immediately."

"I'm not going." But I am.

What other choice do I have?

"Liam, you're forgetting something." Damien's smirk changes. His whole expression shifts, the amusement melting from his face while he stares blankly at me. "Before you go, Quinlan, you have a phone call to make."

A burner phone slides across the table to me. An old black device that Liam pushes my way.

Hope flutters in my heart. Hope that these people aren't as bad as they pretend to be.

"A call to my parents?"

"Adorable." The harsh laugh from Damien has me jumping in my seat. He won't harm me, no. His temper, however, is hanging by a thread. The sharp line of his jaw becomes sharper. Sharp enough to cut diamonds. "No. Not your parents. We told you you're free to email them once you're settled. You will email Ray too, so she wouldn't get any ideas like filing a missing person's report. This evening, though, you're calling Rex. You're telling him you're being taken against your will. That if he alerts the authorities, we'll kill you."

"Rome?" Only darkness and barely contained aggression stare back at me. "Are you trying to get back at him for what happened at the café?"

"Over here, darling." Damien doesn't wait for me to look at him. His long body makes it easy for him to reach for my chin. Close his fingers around it and yank it so I'm caught in his fiery gaze, half of my body hovering over the table. "You call him and tell him Damien Black says hello. Understood?"

I haven't realized what I've gotten myself into up until now. I wasn't chosen at random.

This is personal.

"What did he do to you?"

"I don't want to hurt you." A subtle shake of my chin. "But I will if you don't make the call."

"Damien," Liam warns.

"I will," Damien whispers. He vows. "Call him, little captive."

Whatever happened between Damien and Rex, it's bad. Really bad.

I'll find out. I'll have time. Plenty of it when I'll be locked up in their home. Because that's where I'm headed. Where I'm forced to go.

Until then, I'll fight back. I won't let them treat me like shit. Moreover, since they've made it clear that they won't fire me. They need me as much as I need them.

I plant my hands on the table, pushing myself into Damien. To the pain of his fingers on my chin. "Call him yourself."

His eyebrow cocks at my challenging tone. "Where's the fun in that?"

Neither of the other two men speaks. No one gives or will give me the answers I deserve.

"What about my parents?"

"As promised, money will be transferred to your account." *Flick. Snap.* "We forgot. Tell Rex he's in charge of them going forth."

"He can't," I'm pleading. I'll give up my body. My freedom. I won't lose my parents. "He doesn't know how to."

"He'll learn." Damien releases me with a gentle shove. Nothing aggressive. Nothing that'll knock me off my feet.

It isn't me he hates. It's Rex.

Why?

"The phone, Quinlan." He gestures with his chin toward it. "Make the fucking call. Put it on speaker for us to hear."

This isn't his choice. It's mine. I could refuse. If I make the call, I'm doing it because it's my choice. I have to believe that. Which I do. I *choose* calling Rex.

"Fine." I snatch it from the table. Flip it open and type Rex's number.

And laugh at myself. A harsh, bitter laugh.

Of course my half-brother's number is programmed there.

What have you done, Rex?

"Make it quick." There's chatter in the background when Rex picks up. The clinking of mugs being placed on ceramic saucers. "Table three needs

cleaning," he barks.

Damien, with his sapphire eyes and wicked smirk, met my half-brother somewhere. Rex hurt him. Although…it's impossible to imagine how he'd have done that. Damien's more than strong. He's powerful. Wealthy. Looks like he doesn't give a fuck about anyone, either.

"I'm not in the mood for games. I'm hanging up."

The look on the men's faces could only mean one thing.

I have to answer him, or else. "Rex."

"Kid?" he warns.

Ice freezes my veins. An old fear of being scolded.

My eyes snap shut, hating that they'll hear him talk to me like a child.

Mom and Dad. I'm doing this for them.

"Yeah, Rex, I…"

"Quinlan? Speak up."

A firm hand curls around my ponytail and tugs. Rome has walked around the table and he's here, demanding I talk to Rex while he's being cruel to me.

I loathe how wet I am from this. I'll deny it until the day I die.

"It's me. I have some, uh, not so great news." My voice is strained. Rome's pulling on the roots of my hair, and God, I'm embarrassed.

I've gotten myself kidnapped. I've played right into their hands.

"What news?" The background noise fades. Rex's walking outside or to the back of the café. "Quinlan, answer me, damn it."

A second tug on my hair when I hesitate. Such an infuriatingly humiliating and delicious tug.

"I'm being taken. Uh, kidnapped."

"I warned you. I fucking warned you. I—" He's mad. So mad at me. "I'm coming, kid. You're still home? You turned off your GPS. I can't tell where you are."

Liam nearly crushes the Zippo in his hand. Damien's eyes darken.

"I'm not home. I don't have my phone on me." My cheeks flush. Arousal or shame or both. "You're in charge of Mom and Dad until I'm back. They said if you alerted anyone, they'd kill me."

"Motherfucker." He could be talking to the kidnappers. Could be talking to me. It's been known to happen.

Damien motions for me with his hand to keep talking while Rome yanks on my ponytail. This is the most painful tug of them all.

I yelp.

“Quinlan!” Rex roars.

His anger doesn’t make me feel any safer. In a strange way, I feel safe here. Away from him, where he can’t unleash his rage on me.

I’m losing it. I’ve finally lost it, to even entertain that thought.

“Damien Black says hello.” The words push themselves past my lips. I don’t have another choice. I have to say them.

I’m a captive.

They own me.

“You little fu—”

Damien reaches for the phone before Rex finishes, terminating the call. As Rome releases me, he smooths the hair on the top of my head like I’m precious cargo all of a sudden.

“Good girl, Quinlan.” Damien’s at my side with Liam. His fingers wrap around my bicep in a vise grip. The fingers of one of my captors. “You’ve just saved yourself a punishment. But we’ll have more opportunities. I’m counting on it.”

Liam strokes my cheek, then he and Rome step away.

Damien has a hand curled around my elbow, and we walk outside. He shows me through a door he opens with a lock and we head into another hallway. A darker one that leads us to what seems like a private elevator.

“Ready to go to your new home?” he asks in the elevator.

I don’t answer. I don’t say another word even after we make it to my prison.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Damien

“WE’LL BE HAVING DINNER at seven p.m. sharp,” I tell our little captive. “You’ll show up to eat with us.”

Quinlan and I are in the doorway of her bedroom. Me in the hall, her inside it.

I could barge in. Rip her demure blouse and slacks off her body. Taste her pussy again. I miss her taste, the feel of her pussy on my tongue. Have needed it more than anything since I licked every drop of her orgasm.

Nothing stops me from doing just that.

Nothing, other than my sick and twisted mind.

She would love it if I forced myself on her. Beg like she couldn’t in that restroom with Liam’s hand on her mouth.

I know how to touch her. Know what to do to turn her on.

I. Know. Her.

She knows I do, too.

But she’ll hate me a second later. Might even call me a rapist. I won’t make it easy for her to hate me. I’d much rather leave her conflicted. Play with her for my benefit.

This part of the game isn’t about Rex anymore. Watching her crumble is all about my sick desires. She’s so hot when she’s flustered.

“Before that”—I cross my arms over my chest—“you’ll come down to have lunch. The fridge is packed with food and pre-made meals. Healthy

stuff. Anything you can dream of."

"Not fucking happening," she snarls, her eyes flaring. "I'm never leaving this room."

Her fingers curl around the side of the door. She'd have slammed it in my face if I'd let her.

My hand flattens on the door. My foot is jammed against it. "You will show up."

It sounds absurd to insist on food. To engage in this conversation that sounds like we're reenacting a scene from *The Beauty and the Beast*. I would laugh at how ridiculous it is. Only I don't. I insist on it for Rome. Nothing's funny about his trauma.

"Never leaving." She pushes. I don't budge.

"You'll have to use the bathroom at some point. Which you don't have in there." I raise a challenging eyebrow. "And you will eat, darling. That's not up for negotiation."

"Don't you dare call me darling again." If Quinlan would've realized what her anger's doing to me, I doubt she would've unleashed the way she does. "I'm nothing to you."

"Wrong." When my finger twirls around a lock of hair that's escaped from her ponytail, Quinlan goes red in the face. Her eyes widen and her lips pinch. "You're my captive."

Silence. It'll take her a while before she's used to her new situation. By the time she does, she'll stop resenting it.

She will.

"Darling," I taunt her. Because I'm a sick fuck. Because she's less mad than I would've liked. "Did you hear what I said?"

She hasn't tried to bite my fingers off yet. Until then…

"Shut up." Quinlan's lungs expand with the sharp breath she sucks in. "I'll go out to use the bathroom. Other than that, nothing. I'll starve myself to death, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Then who will provide for your parents if you die?" I'm being a prick. I've taken this too far. But the hatred that's been simmering beneath my skin for Rex has returned with a vengeance after hearing him. Barely containable. Besides, Rome would lose his shit if she won't eat. Right? "Rex? No, *darling*. He won't be able to afford their health care. The doctors. They'll lose their house eventually. Have you considered that?"

As soon as furious tears pinprick the corner of Quinlan's eyes, I kick myself inwardly. I've never intended to aim my bitterness at her. Ever.

In the office, it was different. We had to convince her she had no other choice. That she had to come to us on her own terms.

We would've dragged her here had she said no. We would've.

We didn't have to.

We scared her. Cornered her. Threatened her. She still gave as good as she got.

This, what I'm doing, is awful. Kicking her while she's down is a bastard move. She doesn't deserve it.

You're no better than him, one voice whispers. *Fix this. Fix her.*

"Quinlan." My regret reflects in a softer tone. My eyebrows knit, my fingers sliding to her neck. To her thrumming pulse. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Your parents are safe. I promise you nothing will happen to them."

"Leave me alone." Quinlan blinks furiously. Her gray eyes are an impending storm. "I'm not going to kill myself. I'll do my job. Stay here. It's everything you wanted, isn't it?"

"Quinlan." At the sound of her name, her pulse races faster beneath my fingertips.

But she's not blinking anymore. "Go away."

The moment I hesitate is the moment she tears herself away from me. My hand remains in the air while Quinlan steps back into her room.

I'm dying to follow her inside. To tell her all of this is for her.

The king-sized four-poster bed is meant to make her feel like a princess. That the Egyptian gray sheets were chosen specifically to match the unique color of her eyes.

Every part of me longs to tell her we hand-picked the light gray rug for its softness. That the dark wood dresser and the stocked bookshelves on the wall are there to give her a homey feeling.

That we didn't compromise on her workstation. Got her a top-of-the-line electronic desk and agronomic chair so her neck and back would never ache again.

And the walk-in closet. I want to be there when she sees the clothes upon clothes filling up the racks, the shelves, the drawers. We selected each item for her. Us, not a stylist or even the shop assistants.

Us.

We never discussed why we put so much…*love*…into her room. We just did.

And it's clear I can't discuss it with her, either.

Wish I could.

Later.

There'll be time. When I'm less furious and turned on by her rejection.

When she realizes this is it. The end of the road for her. Which she will.

After all, we have all the time in the world.

"Everything *we* wanted, yes," I correct. "And yet, I'd like to apolo—"

This time, when she shoves the door, I let her. Back up and watch with a satisfied smirk. She slams it in my face with so much fire that I forget about the sad look in her eyes.

She's back. The heavy object she drags on the floor of her bedroom just goes to prove how alive she is.

Despite the tears, Quinlan's definitely not down.

We could fight again later.

Plus, how adorable is it that she believes she can barricade herself inside. That she can keep us out.

Very.

My phone vibrates in my pocket when I think of all the ways I can subdue this feral creature. Despite the relentless need to stay right outside her room, I go over to mine and close the door to keep the call private.

Our doors and walls block out most of the noise. They aren't soundproof.

"Missed me already, sweetheart?" Amused.

That's what I sound like, at least. For the benefit of my friends, mainly. They need things to be okay with Quinlan. For everything to run smoothly.

"Is she there?" Liam asks first.

She should be. I'm definitely not. Being far away from her. Giving her space to acclimate. An allusion that she's safe, even though I can walk in at any moment.

She deserves that.

I wish I didn't care about what she deserves.

That just sounds crazy. So I keep it that to myself.

"What about food?" Rome's second. "You gave her something to eat?"

We don't have cameras here, for obvious reasons. Cameras can be hacked. Anyone—the police, included—could gain access to our apartment.

To the plans we discuss late at night. The plotting that could get us locked up.

“She’s in her room. I’m in mine.” I lower myself to the edge of my king-size bed. Head in my palm, I prepare for what’s to come from Rome after I tell him, “No… She’s not hungry.”

“Rome, she probably had breakfast at home.” I hear Liam talking in his low, comforting voice.

I’m sure he’s there, placing a hand on Rome’s shoulder. He’s good at that, at handling Rome’s anxiety.

I bury my trauma beneath layers and layers of confidence. Of laughter. My friends heard my stories. Saw the scars. The agony on my face while I’d been cut, slapped and kicked around—the screams I shouted while my foster siblings were tortured—they’re mine. I handle it by myself.

Liam and Rome always get the best version of me.

And while I’ll never be as attentive as Liam, I’m here for them. I offer a smile. An inappropriate joke. Just until the storm clouds pass.

“True. What is it, like”—I check out at the clock on the phone—“eleven? Is it really the right time for beef ragu?”

“There’s the lasagna she talked about in the fridge. I made cream cheese sandwiches,” Rome grits out. *Come on, Liam. Do* something. “Egg salad. Chicken salad. She likes those. We have pictures of her eating that. Did you tell her about everything, Damien? Did you show her to the fridge? The pantry?”

My dark blue sheets crumple in my death grip. My eyes close so I don’t see the beige wool rug under my feet or the bookshelves decorating my walls. I don’t deserve this luxury when he’s in so much pain.

Black. That’s what I see. The color of my frustration at my failure.

“She wasn’t exactly asking for a grand tour, Rome.” A wry laugh escapes. I want to save my friend and lack the words to do it. Fuck this. “I tried talking to her on the drive over and got nothing. When the elevator doors opened”—warmth seeps in at the memory, one I hope to transfer to Rome—“she asked, ‘*Where’s my prison cell, asshole?*’”

That was cute of her.

A laugh from Rome. Finally.

“Is that another joke?” he asks, his voice lighter. As much as Rome’s voice can lighten up.

“No.” I sit up straight, feeling a bit lighter myself. “Then she slammed the door to her room in my face.”

“You said something. Went too far,” Liam deadpans. He doesn’t chide me. Just states a fact.

“I did.” No use denying it. “Enough about me. I have it covered. What about you, L? What about Aria?”

Flick. Snap. Flick.

“Liam?” I repeat. “You didn’t go. Don’t you want to see her being miserable? We got her fired. She has nothing but debts and her miserable apartment. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is fuck her,” he snaps. It’s harsher than the click of his Zippo when he shuts it. “I’ll watch her when it’s *time*.” Our code words for killing her. “Our private investigators won’t let her get away. That’s enough for me.”

“You’re passing on her humiliation. We have reports that she’s crying. You’ll love that, won’t he, Rome?”

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

The sound is soft over the phone. Dulled. Silenced, almost. Like Liam was when Aria made it her mission to ruin his life.

I could go over there and slice her throat open. I’d do it. Except this isn’t my revenge to take.

“Maybe we should do this later.” The roles have reversed. Rome’s the one to be in charge of comforting Liam. “Liam, we can take the day off. Reschedule the meeting we have in thirty. Fuck them.”

“No.” Liam clears his throat. Pulls it together. “No. They’re expecting us. Any sign of weakness, and DriverGone will pull out of the deal. They’ll take the other offer.”

He’s not wrong. We’ve been negotiating the terms of our acquisition for months. The small startup company is working on a chip that’s going to change the car world. A couple of guys in their twenties, and they’re already huge.

We know that. They don’t. They have no idea how big they can get with the right funding. No one does, other than Liam and his team and maybe our competitors.

We have the funds to turn their dreams into reality. But others have been snooping.

We have to be there for the meeting.

I would’ve gone, if not for the sweet captive we have locked up here.

The airtight contract I wrote will take my place in the meeting. Rome, Liam, Quinlan and I stand to be even more filthy rich than we have before.

Until the end of time.

We don’t need more money. We want it. The power. The status. No one will ever have control over us ever again.

“I’m fine. Fucking perfect,” Liam insists, not as convincing as he would’ve liked. The way the *perfect* breaks at the end is worrisome. “You want the why, Dame? This is why. Stalking another woman, unless it’s for business purposes, is wrong.”

My mouth opens. Closes. Opens. Snaps shut. Surprising me isn’t easy. It’s even harder when it comes from one of my two best friends.

“That’s why you instructed the investigators to forward her photos to us?” Rome asks.

“Yes. Stalking a person is intimate. It would’ve felt like cheating. Sitting out there, watching her, what, in her underwear? No.”

So we’re bringing it up again. Our obsession.

That’s all there is to it.

“Next thing you know”—my eyes are fixed on the door, on where Quinlan is—“you’ll be asking her for permission to stalk any woman, period. You want her to run BLF with us, L?”

“Hilarious.” Liam doesn’t laugh. “And no, I wouldn’t mind that. She’d be better than any one of us. Goodbye, Dame.”

“For crying out loud, get her to eat.” Rome’s demand isn’t as panicked as before.

Thank fuck for small miracles.

“Yes, Mother.”

By the evening, Quinlan will have eaten. She will.

IT’S BEEN HOURS.

Hours since Quinlan’s gotten into her room. Something crashed against the wall at one point, and I asked her if she was all right. All I got was a growl.

That actually made me laugh. For all of a second.

She still refused to eat.

I tried to distract myself. Showered. Changed into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Made myself a sandwich with the chicken salad Rome talked about and ate it with the sound of Quinlan's footsteps as background noise.

It was delicious, by the way. The food and hearing her raging in her room.

She stopped fury-pacing about an hour ago. I didn't stop going up there, doing everything to convince her to eat.

Nothing got her out of her room.

Not me threatening her. Not me tempting her with the hot food at her door. I ordered veggie sushi rolls from her favorite place, took a picture and uploaded it to the television we have in her room.

That landed me another growl and another something breaking. Glass. Had to be the television.

Fuck the television. We can get her a million more of those. I cared about Rome and her and how I was failing them.

The feeling hasn't left. It's very much there as I'm leaning against the wall in the hallway, watching the door to her bedroom.

Door number two is an option. I could slip into her bedroom through the secret bookshelf door. Hold Quinlan's mouth open, force-feed her, then clamp her nose and mouth shut until she swallowed.

That's hot. My cock strains in my jeans just thinking about it. The pleasure of the act would give me the power over her, her submission.

Violence pummels through me.

How I wish.

How I fucking wish.

Rome, though. He'll hate it. Force-feeding triggers him as much as food deprivation does. He loathes the idea of food being used to torture people.

He's right.

So, here I am. Waiting for her.

My time will be up soon. Rome will be home in a couple of hours.

Steps. Feet padding softly on the carpet. Padding instead of stomping. Fuck, it's adorable. I push from the wall to stand in front of her door.

I flatten my hand on it. I feel her in there.

Christ, this is everything. I want to spank her for withholding herself from me for so long. Need to bend her over and belt her gorgeous round ass. Pelt her worse than Rome had with his hand.

Her gentle padding, out of everything, spreads the sick urges in me to every part of my body. Behind my eyes. Through my blood.

My muscles flex. Breaths laden.

Quinlan keeps padding inside. Stops.

Then—

Dragging sound. Slow scraping. Granted, since every piece of furniture we bought her is expensive. Heavy.

Silence ensues right before the door opens.

She gasps when she realizes I'm there, my arms crossed over my chest. The flush burning through her cheeks makes my cock thicken.

"You." Her scowl, my God.

"Yes, me, darling." I uncross my arms, close my hand on the side of her neck. "Were you expecting anyone else?"

"No." The red on her cheeks is brighter.

She's alive. Fully present. The side of me that gets off pain and fear and all the things I've had to learn to hide. For years, I've been starving to have my hands on Quinlan. Do the worst and best to her.

She'll take me. She'll accept me.

She will.

"Truth is, I was expecting you." Quinlan's pulse rages. For me.

I'm goddamn throbbing for her.

"As in wanting me to be here, darling?"

"You wish." Brave eyes stare back at me. "Expecting you as in expecting you to take a hint. I. Don't. Want. You. Don't want your food, either. Am I being clear, or are you too delusional to get what I'm saying?"

"You're beautiful when you lie."

"Well, you're beautiful when you're not being an asshole." She gasps at her confession.

A heartbeat passes. That's it.

I haul Quinlan to me, slamming her against the wall in the hallway. My cock drills into her belly, and *fuck*, that's good.

"What'd you say?" I roll my hips.

No answer. Only a whimper. A tortured one.

Her knees lock. Eyes pained.

There's desire in them, but it's overpowered by…

"You need to use the bathroom." I'm a fucker. She's aware of that.

She isn’t surprised then, when I grind myself into her again. Pressing myself to her lower belly. She just clamps her teeth on her bottom lip.

“Will you eat if I let you go?” I turn her head to the side, skimming my lips over her jaw. Tracing her soft skin until I reach her ear. “Will you admit how desperate you are for my cock?”

Her body is a mess. Shivering limbs and clenching thighs. And all of it is for me.

“Never.” The word is hardly a whisper.

She’s so tormented. So perfect.

“You will.” A plan forms in my head. It’s easy enough, after years of plotting, to come up with something on the fly. I pull back, grab her hand. “Come on.”

A relieved sigh escapes her. I’m sure she didn’t mean for it to happen. She has to resent me for this, for forcing gratitude out of her.

Another reason for me to relish it.

We head through the hall of the second floor to the guest bathroom. Rome, Liam, and I have private ones in our bedrooms. Quinlan doesn’t. With good reason.

At the entrance to the expansive bathroom, I switch the lights down low. Soft amber glow illuminates the marble floors. The freestanding white tub.

The toilet.

A tremor runs through Quinlan.

“Thanks, bye.” She yanks her hand from mine, flicking it in my direction. Shooing me away.

She won’t slam the door in my face this time. I’m faster than her. Hotter.

My fingers lock around her tender wrist, whipping her back until she’s flush against me. “You’ll eat later.”

“Fine. Leave.”

“I don’t think so.” I level her with a gaze. “You owe me something other than eating.”

“You…” Her lips pinch. Her face twists in agony. “I’ll tell you whatever after I go. Okay?”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, darling. Now.”

My free hand curls around her jaw, dragging her face to mine. Her agony is sweet, and I can’t help it. Can’t resist kissing her. I don’t hold back, licking a trail down the corner of her mouth and along her cheek.

“You’ll tell me your pussy has been desperate for me over the last few days.” I return my eyes to hers, both of us vibrating with need. “That you’re dying for me to take your virgin cunt. Me, or my friends. Or all of us together. Since we are sharing you.”

“Who gave you the right?” she groans, her frustration with herself out there for me to see. To taste.

“Know this, Quinlan. The more you lie to me, and yourself.” I swallow her snarl with another kiss. “The harder I get.”

“You’re sick.” Her fight against me is basically nonexistent. It hurts her to admit it. “Let me go or I’ll pee on the floor to spite you.”

“Nice try.” Someone else might’ve found her threat repulsive. Not me. Nothing about her could ever disgust me. “You can pee here, fine by me. I’ll put you on your hands and knees after that. Push your face until you lick the puddle dry.” I should shut up. Enjoy her embarrassment. But no. Of course I don’t. “I bet you’re used to it. Bet Rex did worse.”

The air whooshes next to my cheek before she slaps me. It doesn’t hurt.

It surprises me.

“What makes you think you know my brother?” She shifts from one foot to another. “What do you want with him? And me?”

“Half-brother.” I hate myself. Hate the images I planted in my own damn head. He didn’t touch her. Didn’t abuse her.

I would’ve seen the bruises. Someone would’ve.

“Tell me what he did.” Quinlan aims for anger. She’s on the verge of tears instead. Her need to relieve herself grows stronger by the second. “Tell me already.”

“I remember I asked you to repeat a certain sentence first.”

And no, I’ll never tell you about Rex. How useless I’d been when he hurt my foster-siblings. How he damaged me for good.

A second slap jolts me awake.

Same cheek.

I growl.

“So that’s how you want it to be?” I push her into the bathroom. Pin her up against the wall by holding her by the throat. “Want me to hurt you? Want me to play the bad guy?”

“You already are.”

With my free hand, I undo the button of her slacks. Yank them and her panties down her legs.

My palm covers her mouth. “Spit on my fingers.”

Her nostrils flare, her expression horrified. “Fuck no.”

“This isn’t wise of you, darling.” I push two fingers past her lips. Her resistance doesn’t bother me. Quinlan is ours. I’ll do with her as I fucking please. “You just admitted I’m the bad guy.”

I draw my fingers back, add a third and shove them back in. She gags, coughs.

“You poked the bear, darling. This is all on you.”

Quinlan bites me. Gags on me. Her choking and fight speak right to my cock.

“Maybe poking the bear is your idea of foreplay.” Spit stretches between her mouth and my fingers when I remove them. “Maybe you’ve been fantasizing about being a dirty little girl, to have someone spank you. Touch you everywhere.”

I find her swollen clit, pressing my wet fingers to it. Quinlan whimpers, wiggling in my hold.

There’s nowhere to run, and it infuriates her, how much she enjoys this. She gets off when I’m being an asshole, and it humiliates her. When she needs to go, no less.

“It made you come so hard, didn’t it? Fantasizing about a man being rough with you.” I rub her in slow circles. “Yes, it did. You’re such a filthy one. I can tell.”

“Please, stop.” But her hand is on my neck, going higher. Tugging at my short hair. Pulling me to her mouth. “Please.”

“Say it.” The day has been a long one. My desires have gotten more depraved the longer she’s kept me waiting. “Say you want my cock.”

“Damien.”

My hand slides lower. Her inner thighs are wet. I gather Quinlan’s arousal before I begin stroking her clit again.

“I-I have to pee.” Her plea is a prayer. A desperate one. “Fuck, okay. I want your cock. I want your thick, fat cock inside me. Tear me in fucking half, okay? Please, just let me pee.”

“That’s a good girl.” I pinch her clit, smiling at her scream. “We’re finally getting somewhere.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Quinlan

DAMIEN WON'T TELL ME what Rex did to him.

Not this minute. Maybe never.

Honestly, I stopped caring over five minutes ago. The pain and pleasure of having him touch me while I needed to use the bathroom is maddening. They wiped out every other coherent thought from my head.

"Go." He removes himself from me. "Use the bathroom. I'm waiting."

"Do you have to be here?" I hardly care about that either. Everything in my body needs. Just *needs*.

To relieve myself. To be touched. To come.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

It hurts, needing everything so completely. It's turning me into a wild woman.

A woman willing to do anything this sadist orders her to.

"Absolutely." He crosses his arms over his broad chest, leaning against the wall. Expression calm, betraying nothing. "Pee."

I don't ask him what'll happen to me later. What he'll do or won't do to me. I don't even ask myself those questions.

Won't admit that I do, in fact, want his cock. I wasn't lying about that.

Never.

“God, you’re such a jerk.” I tug my panties and slacks up, only so I can sprint to the toilet, shove them down again, clamp my knees shut, and go.

“Eyes on me.” The demand is less harsh than I would’ve expected. I look at him, discovering his sapphire eyes are as gentle as his voice. Ish. Gentle-ish. “Good girl, Quinlan.”

Those damn eyes. That voice. This isn’t an act.

Beneath the numerous masks he has on, beneath his cruelty, he cares.

About me.

The longer I go, the more the darkness in his eyes pushes out the blue. By the time I’m done, Damien’s eyes are darker than the night.

“Wipe.”

This is humiliating. More than humiliating, to be ordered like this. As if I’m a child.

This is mortifying.

It shouldn’t be this hot.

It *isn’t* hot.

It isn’t.

“Fine.” Quickly, I wipe myself and flush before he can come over and do that for me. Before Damien convinces me that I like this sick part of our game too.

I don’t.

My fingers hook into the waistband of my panties. He shakes his head. “Off. Take everything off.”

“You’ve seen enough.” I lift my chin. “I did everything you asked for. Enough is enough.”

Hands. One on my throat. The other in my hair. Pulling. Tugging. Yanking.

No air comes in. Damien has it. Damien has *me*.

“One thing you’ll find out about me...” His perfect mouth is too close. He brushes it along my cheek. His scruff grazes my skin, and I shudder. “I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

Showing Damien I’m into the pain he’s administering is wrong. I have to fight him. Have to go back to the safety of my room.

I have to.

“Tough luck. I am not—”

The fabric of my blouse rips apart. In the quiet bathroom, the sound is deafening.

“Please. Do keep telling me no.” His teeth scrape the area right beneath my jaw. He bites me, sucks on the wounded skin. “Give me a reason to torture you.”

“You already are torturing me,” I whisper. Can’t talk any louder than this. “Or is this your idea of being sweet?”

I could blame my mouth for running on me. I could. It would be a lie.

My sick, depraved body craves this man so badly. He ruins me. Breaks me down. And I’m dying for every twisted piece of him.

I wish… I wish Rome and Liam were here too.

“Filthy, filthy girl.” Damien pulls back, hauling me to my feet.

I stand there. I’m a statue, a doll for him to use.

Which he does.

My blouse is a gray fabric cascading to the floor. My bra is removed and discarded.

Damien bends to one knee, and I could take advantage of this moment. I could knee him in the nose, even with my pants and panties bunched around my bare feet.

If I break it, he’ll scream. I could make a beeline for my room.

Instead, I’m frozen. My hands are the only part of me that moves. They slide to grasp at Damien’s hair when he presses his nose to my swollen clit.

“Please.” Self-respect is a faraway concept. I’m soaked. Needy.

Empty.

I’ve never felt this empty in my life.

“Please, Damien.”

“Foot up.” He finishes the sentence by drawing back from my pussy. By biting the flesh of my thigh.

I scream and lift my foot simultaneously. Damien’s dark chuckle reaches me from the floor as he slides what’s left of my clothes past my foot. His hand is clasped around my ankle, placing my foot softly on the floor.

“Was that so hard?” His head is tilted, his gaze taunting me.

“You’re cruel,” I say, but my fingers are deep in his soft, thick hair. “Why are you doing this?”

“Other foot.” He’s quicker than I am. Bites my other thigh to get me to comply. “I remember asking you nicely to come out of the room for hours.”

I’m naked. My clothes are everywhere.

Damien gets up, towering over me. “Nicely.”

“Why did you kidnap me?”

He leads me to the bathtub with two hands on my hips. My ass hits the ledge. I hide the fact that it's cold. Don't flinch or cry out.

"You owe me an answer."

"Nonsense." He drops to his knees. "Best I can do is offer you a game."

So elegant, this man. Every muscle in his body knows its function. Including the smirk curving on his lips. It's there to fuck with my head.

It's working. "What game?"

My traitorous fingers should pluck his eyes out. They do the opposite, stroking his temples, the roots of his hair.

"For every second you make me wait… Every second you stop me, darling." I didn't think his eyes could get any darker. I was wrong. So wrong. "I hurt you."

"Wait for what?"

"Anything." The word is spoken against my pussy. One hot breath, and I moan for him. Fuck. "Anything at all."

"When are we going to play?"

"Forever. Starting this moment."

"What if I say no?"

Damien's hands are aggressive as he presses his fingers to my thighs.

"You lost your right to say no a long time ago." He pins me harder to the tub until the ledge is digging into my ass. "Fuck, that sweet cunt." His eyes bore into me. "Already so wet. It'll be an absolute fucking pleasure to make a mess out of you."

His teeth clamp on my thigh. They're sharp. He's relentless, insatiable, as he bites and sucks on my flesh. He's getting off on my pain. On my screams. On how violently I grasp his hair.

He's going to bite a piece of my thigh off, I'm sure of it. The pain is awful, shooting up and down my body. The excruciating burn reaches to my toes. My eyes burn.

"Stop," I beg. Tears of pure agony cascade down my cheeks. But pleasure is there too. So much of it that I cry harder.

My tears land on the floor. On Damien's face.

"Please." I'm no longer crying. I'm sobbing. This pain won't ever go away. Even after Damien's mouth isn't on me anymore. And I don't want it to go away. "Please, Damien."

He doesn't listen to me. He bites me while he brushes his thumb on my clit. Again. And again. And again.

The pain he's administering with his teeth feels deliriously better. I'm out of my mind. Moaning and groaning, thrusting my hips toward him.

I don't care. More than anything, I don't care about anything.

"I can't." I stare at him. I'm babbling, and I don't know if I can stop. "I can't. Oh my God. Oh my *God*."

"Not God, darling." Damien releases my thigh, and it hurts how much I miss him. He massages the sore area, though it isn't the same as the sweetness of his teeth. Nothing like it. "Not Him. Your pussy is soaked because of *me*. I'm the one who sees through you. Who knows what my pretty little whore wants deep down. I see your heart beating behind your ribs, and it's beating for me. Because you love the pain. You love what *I* give you."

He stands, and before I can stumble, he has an arm around my back. My entire body aches for him. Every part of me brims with the most painful desire I've ever experienced.

"When you beg." Damien's mouth closes on my nipple. He talks between bites. Between lashing his tongue on my sensitive skin. "You don't beg for God. You beg for Rome. For Liam. For *me*. No one else is here to save you. No one else is here to pleasure you. No one's taken care of you in a while. But we are. We will. Beg for me."

"Yes." I'm so fucked. "Fine, fuck. Yes. Please, please, touch me."

His breath is hot on my breast. His tongue swiping along my nipple is a lie. A pretense. Damien Black isn't a nice man.

And the needy, brainless woman is attracted to this monster.

"Only us."

His teeth sink into my breast, and I scream. The shock. The white-hot pain. The desire. Everything hits me all at once, and I cry out his name, pant and sob.

Damien turns me into something I'm not. Into this girl who lifts her foot off the floor and pins it to his ass. With my body, I plead with this evil man to take more from me. Bite me harder. Suck on my flesh until I have no more tears to cry.

He'll leave bruises. I'll bear Damien's mark on me.

"Please." So many tears roll down my cheeks. "More. Please."

"Please, what? What's my name, darling?"

He's in my face. Forehead pressed to mine. Our noses touching. He said I'm desperate for him.

He looks just as unhinged. Just as lost. As needy.

“Please, Damien.”

“Fuck, yes. My name on your lips. Feels so fucking good. Say it again.”

“Damien.”

Emotion flashes behind his eyes. He assaults me with his mouth. Swallows my moan in his kiss. He’s violent, taking everything from me. With his teeth. With his tongue. With his skilled fingers on my pussy, coaxing an orgasm out of me.

I call out his name when I come. I whisper it over and over when he lifts me in his arms and lowers me into the bath. When he starts the hot water.

“Was that so hard?” He’s at my side once I’m settled inside, crouched, stroking my damp hair from my face. “Giving me what I want?”

He’s beautiful. My body is still reeling from the orgasm, but it’s not just a physical need anymore. I…

My hand lifts without my permission, stroking his cheek. He opened up to me and I didn’t hate it. I liked it.

I want more of it.

“Thought you said you’d never beg for my cock?”

“Not your cock.” But also yes, definitely his cock. I need him inside me on a visceral level. I haven’t had anyone else there. All I know is that I need him. “Come in.”

“Once you stop being a brat, you’ll get it.”

“Why?”

He twists his head. His lips are warm on my palm for a second before he takes my wrist and places my hand back under the hot water.

My bottom lip juts out. “You hate me. Because of Rex. This was all a game.”

“No.” Soap is being lathered on my body. He’s soaping me. I didn’t even notice he spurted it on his hand. “I could never hate you. I like torturing you. There’s a difference.”

I’m smiling, and he smirks. After my body is covered in soap, he rises and walks behind me. I groan when he starts massaging shampoo into my scalp.

Minutes pass in silence. Hours even. Who knows?

Certainly not me.

My arms are limp inside the bath. I’m up to my neck in the hot water and bubbles. A hot, unhinged man is washing my hair from behind.

My kidnapper. One out of three.

“Your half-brother isn’t a good man.” Getting out the words is a struggle; I can hear it in his voice.

Confessing the truth.

I tilt my head up to look at him. The anger from before, the intensity, they’re gone. Vanished. The sharp lines of his face have smoothed over.

He really doesn’t hate me. He won’t hurt me.

His teeth on my body? It was a kink. But the way he’s touching me isn’t cruel. His confession about Rex isn’t an accusation.

It’s an explanation.

Interesting. The monster lets me into his softer side. Me.

Why? And why do I like this? Having him trust me?

He took me against my will. I should hate myself, and I’m calm around him.

Through my heavy eyes, I skim his beautiful face. His relaxed lips. The muscles on his forearms and biceps flex while he keeps rubbing my skull. It feels nice.

I’m still curious, and all I can do is frown.

“You asked why, Quinlan.”

“Right.” It takes me a moment to realize my mouth is hanging open. I clamp it shut in a pop.

The corners of his lips lift. For a single, confusing moment. The next, he’s serious.

“Has Rex ever told you what he”—Damien bites his bottom lip, shaking his head and growls—“was. What he did for a living before you were born?”

“He worked at Maeve’s. Always.” I’m starting to come down from the high, but it’s a slow landing. I’m sluggish. My eyes are heavy. “Like you would know. How old are you, even?”

“I do.” He doesn’t stop massaging me. “Thirty-four. Rome is my age. Liam’s two years younger.”

“Okay.” Confusion pulls my brows low on my face. “You couldn’t have met him before, then. You’d have been eleven. Rex was twenty-three.”

“Yes.”

That’s it.

My eyes follow Damien as he walks around to the other side of the tub in complete silence. He reaches inside for the plug and drains some of the

water that has gone cold.

Weird. I haven't known him for long, but he doesn't strike me as the silent type. This man always has something to say. A clever retort. A snarky comment. A command.

Yet he's being quiet. The silence stretches, and Damien keeps moving around the bath. He starts the hot water again, from the handheld shower head this time. They pour out in a soft stream, and after Damien tests the temperature with his fingers, he returns to his place behind me.

"Deep breath. Close your eyes."

When I do, magic happens. His fingers are there to remove the suds of shampoo off my hair, and his touch is…divine.

"Good girl."

Nothing's harsh about him, nothing at all. He disarms me of my anger at being kidnapped, of being manipulated. Damn him, I like it even more when he applies conditioner and washes it off.

I'm clean from head to toe, and he still hasn't explained anything. I haven't pressed him for answers during these long minutes.

Truth is, I'm dreading the moment he will.

"Come here." My legs are wobbly, and he helps me up. He places my hands on his shoulders, not caring that they're wet. His only concern is that I get out of the bath without tripping all over myself.

Water drips from my body to the marble floor while Damien walks off to the vanity.

Not a word comes out of him when he's back. He dries my body with the softest towel. Damien doesn't stop there. He stands behind me, going through the knots in my hair. Carefully. With a brush.

That they bought for me.

Who is this man? Who are *they*?

"Damien?"

He isn't gentle anymore when he puts the brush on the vanity.

He's tense, the air in the room crackling. Damien spins me to him, and his eyes are cagey. The dangerous smirk is plastered in place.

My own defenses rise. "I didn't do anything."

"You're catching on, darling. You didn't do a thing. But I'm hurting him through you. Because he and his dead wife were monsters instead of foster parents. For me and two other kids. Laurel and Jagger." Damien's gaze hardens the moment he says their names. He's not just dangerous anymore,

he’s mean. The man who bit me. The man who took pleasure in kidnapping me. “Story time over. You’re going to eat, and that’s an order.”

An order.

“No.” I narrow my eyes. “Story time is *not* over.”

“Actually, it is.” He gestures to the door. “Go. Get dressed before Rome and Liam are home. Get ready for dinner.”

The pain in my chest doesn’t hurt that bad. It doesn’t. The verbal slap doesn’t sting. The thought of what Damien and his foster siblings had gone through doesn’t bother me.

I don’t feel anything at all.

I try my best to have my tone reflect how much I don’t care. “I don’t respond well to assholes.”

“Wonderful, darling.” In one elegant swoop, he throws me over his shoulder. We’re headed back to my room. My prison. “Since I don’t respond well to brats.”

My thigh, where he bit me, hurts whenever it touches Damien’s body. My breasts are sore. My heart, God, fuck, it does hurt. I don’t want him to shut me out. To stop talking to me.

I thought we were getting somewhere. I thought I could help him. I could help him fix whatever Rex did to him. I would’ve told him that I don’t condone it, any of it.

Rex hurting kids.

I shiver at that. I… Fuck.

Damien places me down at the doorway to my bedroom. His thumb brushes my tattoo. His eyes are as harsh as ever, but his touch is soft. I don’t think he even notices that he’s doing that.

“Good.” My mind is a mess. I’m exhausted. Wrung out. The tightness in my chest becomes insufferable. “So, this brat and this asshole will go their separate ways and won’t meet at dinner.”

“Quinlan.” His eyes focus on me. “There’ll be consequences if you don’t show up.”

“You keep forgetting something.” One, two, three, and I’m inside the bedroom. My fingers curl around the door handle. “I’m here of my own free will. I’m not your captive.”

“Oh, but you are,” he says as I close the door in his beautiful face. “The sooner you realize it, the better.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Quinlan

MY STOMACH GRUMBLES. HAS grumbled over the last hour.

I roll on my back, staring at the fabric draped over my beautiful four-poster bed in my beautiful room.

Room. Ha.

My prison. A gilded cage built by three psychos.

The sheets I'm lying on are so soft. Must be expensive. Like everything else in this room and my walk-in closet.

Classy. Stunning.

Not mine.

I'm not here of my own free will. They coerced me. Used my greatest weakness and locked me up.

"Ugh." I throw an arm over my eyes. Who am I kidding?

I would've come running to them, had the three men been honest. Had they asked nicely. I'd have run to any one of their rooms.

Heat spreads between my thighs when I remember this afternoon. My skin stings, body buzzing for him, the marks on my flesh still bright red in the shape of Damien's teeth.

Stop it, Quinlan.

They haven't asked nicely. They're three unhinged assholes. Stalkers. Obsessed and deeply, deeply disturbed.

Damien accused Rex of a crime. It was the first time I heard about him being a foster dad, much less hurting children.

Damien hates him.

Well, I hate his secrecy.

And it's time I figure out what's going on. I walk through the events of the day.

The three of them blackmailed me into being their captive. Clearly, they're on board with what's happening here.

Whatever they believe Rex did to Damien infuriates the other two men too. Down to their core. A hate they're willing to commit crimes for.

They're eager to hurt my half-brother, yet they won't tell me why.

Rex has a tendency to snap, to be rude. My overprotective older half-brother scares even me sometimes. Plus, all those times he's ordered me to stay at home to take care of my parents.

But… That was his grief speaking. At least that was what he led me to think.

"Ugh," another groan. I have no idea what happened; I just know it's bad.

I remove my arm from my face, looking straight ahead at the shattered television.

Praying for a distraction.

My eyes roam over the room, landing on the bookshelf. This, akin to the closet, has been stocked. A variety of books that seem to be new have been placed there. I looked it over today. There are all kinds of books there. Romance novels, autobiographies, traveling and cookbooks.

Feels random.

It isn't. I'm sure it isn't.

Nothing about these men has been random. Everything has been orchestrated, evidently. I wouldn't be surprised to find out they paid Ray to ask me out to that bar.

My heart twists at that. I thought Ray's invitation was genuine. Her concern for me, that didn't seem fake, either. No. Ray didn't trick me. Ray likes me.

I could never hate you. I like torturing you. There's a difference.

Damien likes me too.

He's an asshole. A deviant. Riling me up turns him on. And he likes me. No doubt about that.

Do the others like me? I think so.

So, it’s just Rex they hate.

I wish they’d tell me what happened. I’m really starting to get pissed. To hate Rex without really knowing why.

Knives and forks clink on plates downstairs, the noise dulling out yet another one of my frustrated growl.

You little fu—

There it is. My proof that Damien isn’t lying. Rex recognized his name.

The more I repeat Rex’s words—the tone he used when he said them—the angrier I get.

Sure, I could’ve demanded answers earlier. Could’ve opened the door when Liam knocked before dinner. When Rome shouted from the other side that I had to join them.

Damien started opening up when we were together in the bathroom. I didn’t understand him, not fully. I was overwhelmed by the pain, by the orgasm. By his kindness.

He stopped there, though. I could tell Rome and Liam wouldn’t say anything without his permission. They were tight, the three of them. So I stayed here. Shouted back at Rome to fuck off. Shouted it at the three of them.

Water runs in what must be the kitchen sink on the first floor. The sound is faint. Hardly audible.

Dinner is over.

My window of opportunity has closed. My chance to join them, to pretend nothing’s happened and start asking questions is over.

The cozy atmosphere of a *family* dinner has ended. They won’t pass me the salad or offer me a second helping of ragu Damien talked about.

The three of them will go to their separate rooms. Back to being assholes.

Sigh.

Frustration and curiosity war within me.

Frustration for being weak. I’ve given in to them too many times. I *begged* for Damien today. I got off on the pain. No more of that. They could be psychos who’ll keep me here indefinitely. They could ignore my tantrums.

They could. I, on the other hand, can’t ignore my curiosity.

Rex isn’t innocent, and Damien wasn’t lying. He recognized him. I can’t stand by and pretend no crime was committed against him. It’s impossible for me to pretend everything’s fine when it isn’t.

I believe the three men, even if they haven't asked me to. I don't even hate them, as harsh and unhinged as they are.

He isn't a good man. A monster. Damien said that.

My skin crawls with each passing second.

Words like child molester come to mind. A pedophile. He could've beaten them so badly that they passed out. Rex is a big man. He has a temper.

And he'd warned me about people.

If someone says they're a friend of your parents or mine, tell them to talk to us. Not you. Never you, you hear?

I heard him. Loud and fucking clear. As a child, I watched his face redden while he drilled those lessons into me. He looked horrified at the thought of someone taking me from him.

Was he that intense because he was that person? Because he knew firsthand the damage he'd caused other children as a foster dad?

Bile rises in my throat. My entire body breaks into shivers.

You little fu—

"This isn't helping," I say to myself as I sit up on the bed. Plant my feet on the wool rug beneath me. "I won't get my answers being cooped up in here."

Great. Just great. I called my three kidnappers crazy, and here I am, talking to myself. Out loud while I'm doing my best to stop my stomach from churning.

The truth. I need the truth.

It must be documented somewhere here, the evidence of what happened. Something.

Probably in their laptops, or their drawers. They have to have an office, so I'll search there as well.

When I find out—and I will—I'll be able to understand the severity of the situation.

I'll know which side is in the wrong.

More importantly, I'll be smarter around these strangers.

I have to.

It could be a matter of life or death.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Rome

“EARTH TO ROME.” DAMIEN waves a hand in my face. “Are you listening?”

No. I haven’t been listening to him for the last five minutes, at the very least.

It’s rude. Dame and I on one of the sofas in the living room late at night. We should be talking, yet all I can think about is her. Quinlan.

She hasn’t eaten all day.

Spacing out is beyond rude. It’s irresponsible. We’re hashing out the last details in my revenge plot against Joseph and Elaine, my so-called parents. He walks me through the part Jagger and Laurel play in this. This is important.

We’re *this* close to the end.

And I can only seem to care about one woman and the fact that she hasn’t eaten.

“Sorry.” On days like these, I wish I’d have grown my hair. At least I’d have something to pull on. Instead, I rub my jaw, my fingers harsh on my skin. “Repeat that for me.”

“It’ll wait. You’re worried about Quinlan. Don’t.” He dips his chin, his expression serious for all of a second. Then, a ghost of a smile spreads on his lips. “She’ll eat. It’s a promise.”

Holding Quinlan captive shouldn’t be like this. My chest shouldn’t squeeze because she refuses to put food in her mouth.

Liam’s usually the one to help me when I’m like this. When the trauma from my past threatens to choke me. But he’s in his room, digging into a company that’s been on our radar.

Damien tries. I appreciate it, especially since I know he struggles with these conversations.

“Or…” he starts. “You’ll finally give me the green light to force food into her pretty mouth.”

Tries, and succeeds. I know—I *know*—he’s using it as a shield. I’ve seen what lies beneath. How he’s both this person and the other.

What the world has turned him into.

No matter what, he’ll always be my friend. I love him like a brother. Always.

“No, no force-feeding needed.” I huff out a laugh.

His grin widens by a fraction.

“No one’s died from missing a couple of meals. I’m aware.” The words unburden me. They’re a reassurance. A reminder that I survived worse, and she’ll be fine. “There’s always tomorrow. Or she’ll raid the fridge once we’re done for the night.”

Damien’s eyes cut to my fists. I’m clutching them at my sides. The blood on my knuckles is fresh after my workout earlier this evening.

The physical pain was a lifeline. I would’ve punched through Quinlan’s door otherwise.

She has no idea what it does to you.

The punching bag suffered the consequences. It took everything I gave it—my anxiety, my desperation for her to eat. I released my aggressions, left them there in a pool of sweat. Blood stained the leather of the bag when I left the gym.

I’m not that person. I. Am. Not. Him.

I flex my fingers, smoothing over my gray sweats. There. I’m better. Back to missing her instead of freaking the fuck out.

“Who knows.” Damien waggles his eyebrows. “Maybe she’ll be in the mood for meat. She’ll eat so much protein that she’ll grow to be like you one day.”

Before I can tell him I’ll take her in any shape or size, I hear it.

A piece of furniture drags on the floor of one of the rooms upstairs. My head snaps in that direction. I'm on my feet, and so is Damien.

We don't go to her, though, as defenseless as she is. We listen in, stalking her in our own home. We're vipers in the grass. Wolves hiding in the shadows, anticipating the right moment to strike.

My anxiety is a distant memory. My chest stopped aching. The feral need to hunt her trumps everything else. And fuck, do I need to punish her for refusing to eat.

"Want me to call Liam?" Damien asks in a hushed voice. "Tell him to catch her?"

I shake my head once. Liam would rather stalk her too.

"Come." Never losing sight of the stairs, I motion for Damien over to the corner of the dark living room. Where we'll be engulfed by the shadows.

Her footsteps are soft. She basically floats along the second floor. My muscles strain as I listen to what she's doing up there.

Doors open and close. She's checking our bedrooms. Must be trying to log into our password-protected laptops.

She's free to snoop around our rooms. First off, we'll have no secrets from her soon enough. Sometime after she realizes she's ours and stops fighting this.

Second, we have no secrets anywhere around the house. We haven't gotten to where we are by being reckless. No paper trail. No emails. No credit card receipts linking us to the men and women we hired to do some of our dirty work.

Nothing.

The police, FBI, CIA—goddamn Interpol—are free to visit us as well. They could raid our laptops, our rooms, our closets. No one would find any evidence of what we've been planning.

Other than the notebook. It's locked in a drawer in our office, papers filled with scribbling and code words. The pages are old. Some of our notes are two decades old.

A stranger wouldn't understand a thing we have there.

Would Quinlan?

Damien grins. "Sneaky," he mouths. "I like that."

She is.

A hushed gasp reaches from above us. She's found Liam.

My friend's blue eyes meet mine. "Let's join them."

All the blood in my body rushes south. My cock thickens. The need to conquer crashes into me.

We're doing this.

Click. Another hushed sound. A door closes.

Liam's beat her at her own spying game. He must've heard Quinlan and pretended to be asleep.

Tap, tap, tap and she's at the landing. Quinlan's slender hands curl around the railing as she leans forward, scoping the first floor.

My eyes narrow, taking in our prey.

Her long blonde locks dangle in front of her. She wears one of the black tank tops we stored in her closet and a pair of black sleep shorts.

Left, then right, her head twists. Searching for us.

She's so sweet. So naïve to believe that being careful will save her from what's coming to her.

We're coming to her.

"Rome." A soft elbow to my ribs. "Are you watching this?"

Fuck yes, I'm watching this. "What else could I be doing?"

What any sane person could be, when she's there, the curve of her ass peeking beneath her sleep shorts. We get a better view of it as she descends the stairs, when she tiptoes her way around the first floor.

She's looking for us in all the wrong places. The obvious ones, like the sofas. A peek into the kitchen. She doesn't go farther into the living room, though. Doesn't check out the corner where we're hiding.

I'm harder than I thought possible.

Another step in our direction, and she'll see us.

Except she doesn't. She disappears down the hall.

Clever. She's after our office where the information she's desperate for is supposed to be. She'll find the office, but the answers she wants won't be there. Not all of them.

We'll be there.

As if we needed an excuse to have our hands on her, she just delivered it to us on a silver platter.

She'll be punished for snooping around. For refusing to eat. For being so tempting.

Damien and I exchange a glance. We have just the right punishment for all these transgressions.

"How long are we giving her?" His sapphire eyes are dark.

As dark as I feel. “Two minutes tops.”

He needs her more than Liam does. More than I do.

He’s had Quinlan—while she’s awake—twice without coming. Pleasuring her took precedence. He loves playing with her. Hunting her.

He loves her, period, even though he won’t admit it.

He’ll have her soon. Every second that Damien and I stand here builds anticipation. The painful need curls around my chest. The pressure inside my head grows. My hands hurt with the need to inflict pain.

She’s been there long enough. The wait is over.

“I’m going,” Damien says the same moment my patience snaps.

We stalk forward, our bare feet silencing our steps.

She doesn’t hear us coming. We hear her, though, once we enter the hall. Sifting through our things. Pens, contracts, folders.

Then…silence. Is she looking at the photo? I don’t think she does. Quinlan won’t care for that this early in her captivity. She broke her television. She slammed the door in Damien’s face after he licked her, after he bathed her.

She must be too mad at us to slow down and care about what we looked like as kids. With good reason.

We move closer. Low light sips through the crack in the door. The sound of drawers opening and closing floats into the hallway. One of them jangles—the locked one. A groan follows. More silence.

Damien and I are a foot away from the door. We don’t stay here long.

I push through the door, and both of us stroll into the room, standing side by side. I’m supposed to tell her something like *bend over*, then spank her. I do no such thing.

The sight before me stops my heart.

Last time it stopped, it was when I realized I’d neglected Anne for too long. She lied about eating for my sake. She wanted me to focus on building BLF from the ground up with my friends. I’d spent long nights there, and I missed the signs. Didn’t hear Joseph waking her up in the middle of the night and forcing her to throw up the dinner I dropped off for her.

I thought I was stealthy. That he didn’t see. I was wrong. Realizing Anne’s gone this long without food hurt like a motherfucker. I couldn’t breathe.

Tonight, my heart stops for another reason entirely.

This… This is sweet.

Quinlan has her back to us, a photo in her hands. The only one we have here. The one I thought she wouldn't care for. Her fingers slide along the silver frame, her head bowed over it.

Looking at us. At Liam, Damien and me, sitting on the grass in Liam's backyard. I'm hugging a three-year-old Anne to my chest. Pulling her to me as hard as I can.

Liam and I don't smile. Our serious expressions had been a part of us as much as the color of our hair. Damien smiled, though. He laughed. As did my little sister. She giggled that day, flashing her teeth to the camera.

Maybe it was Damien that poked his tongue at her a second before. Maybe it was the big lunch and attention Mrs. Frost, Liam's mom, had showered her with that afternoon.

Maybe both.

Liam's mom captured the moment around the time Quinlan was born. We weren't sure where social services would move Damien, what foster home he'd land in, so we needed to have this memory together. Just until we'd have him with us again.

Fortunately, Damien didn't move very far. He stayed at the same school as us like he promised he would. His next foster family was a great one, a caring one, as were the ones that took in Jagger and Laurel.

That gave him even more reasons to love Quinlan.

And Quinlan's staring at it, mesmerized by it. She could've smashed it like she did with the television, and she didn't.

She cares. I want to hug her. I want to kiss every inch of her body. Breathe her in.

Fuck her until she cries.

Liam slips in, moving to my side.

My cue to speak up. "Curious, sweetheart?"

She shrieks at the sound of my voice. The photo crashes on the floor. The glass splinters.

We'll have a new one developed by tomorrow. Her fear was worth it.

Quinlan's shoulders rise. Fall. She's gathering courage.

"You." She whips back to meet our gaze, hands on her hips. "Of course I'm curious. I have a right to know why I'm here."

"You do." I prowl forward. Stop behind the desk, where she stands. My hand clasps around her slender neck. I grip it, pulling her toward me. "You

could’ve asked, though. Since you haven’t, since you’ve been a nosy little thing on top of missing dinner, you won’t be getting your information.”

Her eyelashes flutter, pulse racing.

“You’re getting *us*.” She gasps when I bury my fingers into her hips, my hand bruising her. Thrusting her to my cock. “And, sweetheart?”

“What?”

“You’re going to wish you never left your room.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Quinlan

A MOUSE IN A deadly trap. A spy found by her enemies.

Caught up in a storm of dark blue eyes and locked by a set of rough hands.

That's me.

Sad thing is, I haven't found anything that would be worth my predicament. This being captured, cornered, *again*, by the three of them.

Nothing at all. Their rooms are identical. White walls and a dark accent one like mine. One large painting is hung on it. Walk-in closets that are stacked with clothes. Adjoining bathrooms.

Password protected laptops and one sleeping Liam.

Who isn't asleep at all.

Here, the only worthwhile thing I found was the picture of them and the little girl Rome was holding.

I've come up with nothing, and I'm being punished for it anyway.

"Did it turn you on?" Rome puts his face to mine while another pair of large, familiar hands grip my hips from behind. Damien. "Spying on us? Looking into things you shouldn't?"

"Being bad?" Damien's hands skim higher up my body. Under my tank top. He trails them over my skin in such a skilled way that I can't catch my breath. "Yeah, it did. I can tell. You're hot for this. For being punished."

My eyes dance between Rome’s blue ones. They skate to the doorway, to Liam who’s watching us, a stony expression on his face.

Damien demands my attention. He hauls me to his front. Even through his jeans, I feel how hard he is. How big.

I haven’t given my pulse permission to skyrocket. Haven’t allowed my blood to boil. My skin breaks into goosebumps.

My body doesn’t care for my consent. No one can help me, least of all me.

“I’m not turned on,” I lie. Lying gets harder when Rome leans in, brushes his lips against mine, then tortures me by pulling back.

“Liars”—Damien sinks his teeth into my shoulder, forcing a cry out of me—“get punished. You just keep begging for those, don’t you?”

“No.”

“Another one.” His tongue flicks on the area he wounded. “Are you going to tell us you’re not wet, too?”

“I’m not wet.”

His hand slides to my front, his middle finger slipping under my shorts. Under my panties.

“Stop.” *Please, don’t.*

“No.” He finds my wetness and dips two fingers into my core, then drags them up to my clit.

Despite my clenched teeth, a moan escapes. A storm flashes across Rome’s features. Damien chuckles, his breath hot on the skin where he bit me.

“I was upset when you didn’t show up for dinner. I’m not anymore.” Rome’s hand is so strong. He’s collaring me. Shackling me to him while Damien makes me squirm and roll my hips.

I don’t want it. I do.

I don’t.

None of us says a word. Damien pinches my clit. Licks and bites the crook of my neck. Rome squeezes my neck.

It’s impossible to stop this orgasm. As shameful as it is, I’m riding his hand. Grasping his forearm. Coming harder at every “Good girl ” he whispers in my ear.

Until I’m spent. Until Rome threatens to stop air from coming in my throat.

“Can’t say that I hate it.”

I’m confused. My brain isn’t working the way it should. “Hate what?”

“You.” Rome’s lips are hot on mine. He kisses me, his tongue running along the seam of my lips. Pushing into my mouth before the sadistic monster breaks our kiss. “Being a brat. Refusing us. Calling us names. Barricading yourself. Breaking things.”

He levels me with a menacing glare. I can’t breathe.

“Snooping on us.”

“Our dirty little whore,” Damien teases, his fingers never leaving my clit. “Doesn’t know how to ask for the pain she’s so desperate for.”

A mask of indifference lowers on my face. I hope. I pray it hides my frustration when Rome puts some distance between us. I wasn’t ready for him to leave me. For him to feel this far even with his hand choking me.

I wasn’t ready to be this upset over this.

When I stepped out of my room earlier, I had it all figured out. Proof of what Rex had done to Damien first. Only then would I let them touch me.

My body had other plans.

Still does.

I’m starving for them after the orgasm Damien gave me. The fire that stokes inside me whenever these men are near hasn’t quelled.

The flames rise higher.

Rome chokes me but won’t let me have his mouth.

This has to be the punishment they promised. Why Liam won’t leave his spot at the doorway. They’re going to tease me with their bodies, then take it away.

“You have no right,” I grit out. Getting a grip on my reactions becomes harder by the second. I steel myself in place as best I can. Hold back instead of launching forward for his lips. “No right to stop kissing me.”

“I say we do.” The pressure of Damien’s fingers on my clit is gone, proving a point. Bastard. “You’re our captive. We have every right to use you. Punish you. Abuse you.”

I scowl. “Deny me.”

“That too.”

“Tell me, sweetheart, what were you hoping to find here?” Rome cuts off more air. “Don’t try to lie to us again. We’ll get creative with our punishments. Tease you for hours. Days. Weeks. I’ll spank and belt you until you make a mess of your panties. Your virgin pussy will be soaked. You’ll cry and beg me for release. We won’t let you have it. Lock your

pretty pussy in a chastity belt. We'll deny you orgasms until you start learning some manners."

Jesus fuck. I'm clenching my thighs, my nipples taut. Fuck him for making his threats so hot. Rome's cruel words and harsh glare shouldn't end with me choking down a whimper.

Blood rushes between my ears. It's loud, but it doesn't dull out Damien's voice.

"But first." He lowers the zipper of his jeans. Fabric moves over skin and I can tell without seeing him that he's taking himself out. "The real punishment we came here for."

He hasn't forced himself on me the other two times. Wanted to, but didn't.

He's done waiting.

His hands return to my body. His fingers hook on the waistline of my shorts, taking my panties down with them.

One swift move, and I'm naked from the waist down.

I'm shackled by Rome, in no position to fight back. I wouldn't even if I could. Not a single part of me objects to what they're doing.

"Look at you." Damien's hand cracks on my ass. Lightning flashes behind Rome's eyes at the sound. "You said you'd never be our whore. Now this. Pushing your ass back to me. So needy." He leans forward, arm around my front, taking me from Rome. Flipping me and pressing my pussy to the edge of the desk while kicking my legs open. "The things we're going to do to you."

Damien's cock is bigger than it felt through his jeans. Terrifyingly big when pinned to my bare behind. We're skin to skin. His teeth are at my shoulder, scraping, exploring.

Biting.

Another humiliating moan brushes past my lips. Rome twists my head, catching the sound with his mouth and just as fast, he pulls back.

"Fuck you."

"Tell us." Rome's serious. Studying me. "What were you searching for?"

It's on the tip of my tongue, telling them that I believe Rex did horrible things to Damien. That the picture they have here broke my heart.

Made everything more real.

They were kids.

But I won’t admit to it. Not yet. Not while I need information from them in return. Not while they can take everything from me.

“I told you. I needed to learn why you kidnapped me.” I’m honest. Sort of.

I’m being rewarded for it.

“That’s progress.” Damien bends me over the desk, his hand between my shoulder blades. “I hope you don’t think it means I’ll go any easier on you. Your tight little cunt will be sore after we’re done with you.”

Liam’s silence is as chilling as Damien’s cock lining my pussy.

I’m a virgin. Needing him to take me as brutally as he said is fucked up.

Yet I do. I *so* do.

“You won’t find the answers anywhere in this penthouse.” Rome’s gaze hardens above me. Eyes stormy. “Only we have them.”

“When you’re good, you’ll learn why.” Damien’s hand travels lower, pushing the hem of my top up my back.

His touch is electrifying, and I shiver, grinding into the desk, as humiliating as it is.

“Yes, darling.” He leans into my shoulder. This bite hurts worse. This bite breaks skin. I scream, yet my body is craving for more of it. “That’s what being a good girl means. Fucking the desk. Pushing back on my cock. Fuck, I’m barely an inch inside and you’re already sucking me in.”

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

“Liam,” Rome says, still staring at me. “How did you like it? Catching our little captive snooping in your room?”

“It took a lot.” He prowls toward us; I can hear his feet on the floor. “To keep up the pretense. You were such an adorable little flame. Trying to hack into my laptop. I could’ve had you like that too. Bent over my desk. So close to fucking you. But watching you was just as good. I was so fucking hard for you.”

Fire. Blazing through me. Burning me to the ground.

He deceived me.

I can’t slap him. Can’t curl into a tiny ball and disappear, either. Damien’s pinning me to the desk. He makes sure I don’t move while Rome steps aside and Liam takes his place.

In a white crewneck T-shirt and dark jeans, the gold Zippo in his hand, Liam is beautiful. Wrapped in loud silence. Watching me clutching my fingers on the edge of the desk.

Being taken by Damien.

“Just the tip,” he says. “A warning before I tear into you.”

I’m going to die. I don’t even have it in me to speak.

“Are you disappointed?” Damien taunts, squeezing one of my butt cheeks in his hand. “That Liam didn’t go through with it? That I’m the one taking you first?”

He isn’t being insecure. I’ve been around him long enough to realize it’s a rhetorical question. He’s playing with me.

“I’m not disappointed.” Two can play this game. He teases me into delirium, parting my lips, soaking himself with my arousal. I still have it in me to fight back. “I don’t want you inside of me, period.”

“Liar.” His hand is hot on my ass, spanking me three times. He pushes into my untouched hole, just a little deeper. Not enough to tear through my barrier. Enough that the invasion feels good. “Look at you. You’re such a slut for my cock.”

“She is.” Liam brushes a lock of hair from my face.

“You’re not denying it.” Another hand locks around the back of my neck. I can’t see Rome, but I know it’s him. “That’s better. You’re getting used to us. To being ours.”

“Never.” But I am. It’s not my body seeking them. It’s me. All me.

“You have exactly one second, little flame.” Liam bends at the waist, his lips crushing my mashed ones.

This isn’t like Rome or Damien kissing me. Liam’s tongue explores my mouth. His lips demand that I open up, that I surrender and hand him over control. Every bit of it.

“One second for what?” I’m floating by the time Liam’s lips are gone.

His kiss has done that to me. Rome’s harshness. Damien’s subtle, torturous rocking in and out of me.

“One second to give Damien your consent.” Liam’s voice is low. Dangerous. “He’ll take you either way. He’ll fuck your virgin pussy. Willing or not.”

Breathe. That’s all I can do. Breathe and want them. Words are too much. Words—my consent—will lead them to believe they have the upper hand.

And why not? Why the fuck not?

I’ve always resented Rex for bossing me around. This… I like this.

These men see right through me. See what I’ve needed for years. I’ve been self-sufficient. Independent. I’ve been responsible for the two people

who were supposed to take care of me.

I've been longing for this relief. I had no idea—had no one to offer this to me.

They give it to me. A present wrapped in an unhinged, big bow. They're what I've been missing my entire life.

When I don't give them the consent they're looking for, Damien pulls my hips back, sinking in another inch. Cold air caresses my wet pussy from the front, and Liam cups me. His big middle finger slides past my lips. Pushes inside, sliding past Damien's cock and goes deeper.

"You want it. You want his fat cock inside you so fucking bad, little flame."

My eyes widen as Liam removes his finger, sucking it into his mouth.

A hum of approval sounds at the back of his throat. A flame flickering behind his amber eyes.

"I can taste it." His attention was on my eyes before. It's turned on my tattoo. "Still, I'd rather hear you say it."

"I'm your captive."

This is it. This is the last of my resistance leaving my body. It's impossible to hold on with Damien trailing his hand up my body and pinches my clit.

But damn it, I need answers. I need clarity.

I could never hate you. Damien's words.

It doesn't feel like he does, even when he forces himself on me. He doesn't feel like the bad guy in this story. He feels like mine.

"You are our captive, true." He strokes the curve of my ass. "So?"

Rome yanks on my hair with his other hand, and I yell at the strain on the roots. Liam watches, one eyebrow cocked.

"You don't have to ask for my permission," I tell Liam. To Damien. To Rome.

To all of them.

"You could kill me," I whisper.

I'm reaching. Searching for clues. Anything. Hurting Rex through me could mean leaving my dead body at his doorstep.

That'll fuck him up.

"What makes you think we'd do that, sweetheart?" Rome growls. "That we'd ever risk losing you?"

He’s right. I don’t believe that. I believe something’s happened to them. That they’re too proud to open up to me. Either that, or they don’t trust me.

And I’m so hot. My grasp on reality is slowly slipping away.

“She’s testing us.” Liam shoves his fingers into my mouth. Pulls them out with a pop. “She knows we’ll never kill her. That she’s never getting away from us.”

“And I won’t tear into you before you come a second time.” Damien grabs my hips, holding me steady. Holding himself.

Liam bends closer, leaning into me. Our faces are inches apart.

“No consent it is,” he whispers. “I’ll rub your pretty pussy until you change your mind.”

My lips part as my breath hitches. Liam’s wet fingers at my core are too much. His expert touch. His ruthless stroking. Pinching. Tapping on my sensitive clit.

My nerves hum, they sing for him. While Rome tugs softly on my hair. While Damien slides another inch in, then drags his cock out.

“Liam.”

“We’re here.” His voice is sharp. Low. Reaching into my soul. His scar shines in a brilliant shade of pink. “You’re going to come on my fingers. You’re going to beg for it. When you’re soaked and ready, Dame will fuck you. We’re all taking turns after him. It’s been so long, little flame. So long that we’ve needed you.”

They could be obsessed psychos. Stalkers. Kidnappers.

They could’ve been hurt in the past.

And they care about me. No one’s ever cared for me like this. I can put my doubts away for tonight.

I will.

“Damien,” I beg. I pray for him. “Please.”

“Such a good girl.” He sounds strained. His fingers leave dents on my hips.

“Good girl?” The reprieve I get when Rome lifts his hand from my hair is temporary. Three cracks on my ass. “What did she do?”

I’d answer, except Liam’s lips are on my neck. He sucks so hard that I sob.

“She’s only allowed to pray to us.” The head of Damien’s cock throbs at my entrance. “We’re her gods now.”

“Oh, are we?” Five painful, delicious strokes land on my upper thighs. Rome presses my face harder to the countertop of the desk. “Answer me, sweetheart.”

“Yes,” I scream. A part of me even believes it. I’m so close. This orgasm builds up fast. I can already tell it’s going to be unlike any other. “Yes. Oh, please. Please.”

“That’s right, little one.” Liam’s groan reverberates on my skin. He smells so good. Clean and soapy. “This particular God will be really pissed if you don’t come on His fingers. Might even punish you worse than these two ever will. Take your ass. Then you’ll learn what it is to be a good girl.”

His words. Their hands. Damien’s teasing cock. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.

I can. Fuck.

Fuck.

I’m a gasping, crying, squirming mess. I orgasm so hard I’m blabbering. Or maybe I don’t say anything at all.

Liam’s amber eyes get further away from me. Rome’s teeth are on my earlobe.

Most of all, it’s Damien’s voice that reverberates through me.

“Oh, fuck, Quinlan.” I’m the one who’s been subjected to pain, but it’s Damien who sounds like he’s tortured. “Fuck, she’s sucking me in. I can’t stop. Can’t wait.”

He sinks his cock inside of me. Tearing through the barrier that’s been there for the past twenty-three years. Every thick inch of him stretches me. His hips press into my ass and his fingers scratch and claw at my flesh.

My skin breaks. My heart expands.

I’m still coming. Still shaking. Hanging between heaven and hell.

His cock makes it better.

His cock makes me cry harder.

“Such a good girl.” That’s Rome. He’s every bit of a thunder he’s always been. He’s also smoothing my hair away from my face.

“Taking Damien’s cock so well.” Liam licks my tears. Runs his tongue along my lips. Continues to rub my clit even though there’s no way I’ll come again.

Because—“It hurts. Damien, it hurts.”

“You’ll get used to me.” He’s not letting up, slamming harder into me. Liam’s hand and my pussy bang against the desk, and Damien doesn’t care

about that, either. “You’ll get used to *us*, darling. We’re not going anywhere. This sweet, tight—*fuck*—this hot little pussy. It’s ours.”

Every word is a stroke. A stretch. A torture.

Pleasure. So much of it that I come and come and come. I don’t think I’ll ever stop.

“I’m close.” It’s been minutes. So many minutes that Damien’s been fucking me. He bats Liam’s hand away from my clit. His fingers are on me. The fingers that know my pussy so well. “Fuck, I’ve been waiting for this. Have been waiting for you. Give me that third time. Be a good girl for me, darling. Come on my cock again.”

Rome appears next to Liam, glaring at me while I’m being railed by their friend. Both men are terrifying.

“You’re taking me next.” His pupils are black, huge, pushing out his dark blues out. He whips his T-shirt over his head, shoving his hand inside his pants and pulls out his cock. “I’ll make your pussy weep for me. Just like your eyes do.”

“What a beautiful, sobbing mess you are.” Liam pushes his zipper down. Takes himself out. A salty drop beads at the tip. His dick is just as big as Rome’s. As big as Damien’s feels. He slaps my lips with it, wetting them with his precum. “Come, Quinlan.”

My orgasm is a searing pain. It’s a blinding pleasure.

My nails scratch the surface of the desk, no doubt leaving marks.

“Yes.” Damien’s thrusts faster. Deeper. The stretch is impossible, and I take it. For him. For myself. “Fuck yes, darling. You’re so tight. So perfect. I—*fuck*—”

Liam moves back when Damien groans. When he loses control and buries himself into me, chasing his release with harsh pumps. Heat spreads throughout me from the inside. There’s so much of it that Damien’s cum spills down my inner thigh.

“Good girl.” When he’s done emptying himself, he pulls out. Pushes his fingers and cum in me. “Every drop, darling. Take all of it.”

“Yes.” I’m floating, high on multiple orgasms. I conveniently ignore the fact that I’m not on birth control. “Everything.”

Damien moves only when another set of hands holds me. Rome’s hands. I’m a rag doll in his strong, capable grip. I’m breathless, letting him pick me up in the air.

“You’re mine.” He splays me on my back on top of the gray rug. “Aren’t you, sweetheart?”

“Your captive.” I’m the farthest thing from it. He smirks when he locks my wrists over my head with one hand. “I’m your captive.”

“Such a glutton for punishment.” His voice is as wicked as his smirk.

He pushes into me, and it’s the sweetest agony. The cruelest, most delicious stretch.

“Don’t worry,” he grunts, thrusting into me. “I’m a patient man. Persistent. I’ll fuck the attitude out of you. I’ll fuck you however many times you need. Until you learn. You’ll give in.”

Rome shows me how serious he is by fucking me into the floor. His lean muscles bulge, his body forcing me to open for him. Wrap around his girth. Accept him.

He dips his head low, kissing me as hard as he pummels into me. His skilled tongue pushes inside me, fighting with mine. His teeth sink into my lip, and he bites me there. Drawing blood.

A crazy, scary thought comes to mind. He’s harsh and brutal. My wrists hurt, my legs part to accommodate this beast of a man. And something’s missing. He’s holding back. Like he could do so much worse, and he’s sparing me.

A crazier thought ensues.

It’s wrong that he has to restrain himself. I gave myself to him. To the intense man I met on the street.

This toned-down version of him won’t do.

“More,” I moan against his lips. “Please. Don’t hold back. You won’t break me.”

His gaze skims my face. My neck. My breasts. His thumb strokes my wrists, once, twice.

The calm before the storm.

Rome rises while he keeps rutting into me. His vicious gaze cuts to the side.

“Damien, come here.” Only when Rome calls him do I realize that Damien’s been here, on his knees. He’s tucked himself in. “Quinlan’s asking for more.”

Mortification is too gentle of a word for what I’m experiencing as I watch the blood of my hymen on Damien’s fingers. He’s amused, the corner of his mouth hiking up.

Liam’s on the office chair, watching the whole thing.

“Stop,” I plead with Rome. “Please. I didn’t mean my blood.”

“Shut up.” Rome’s fingers curl around Damien’s wrist. He drags the evidence that Damien took my virginity to my face. “I fucking love that. Your blood. How you’ve been saving your pretty virgin pussy for us. We all do.”

My mouth parts in shock. Damien takes advantage of my frazzled state. Rome releases his friend’s wrist, and he shoves his fingers in my mouth.

Tries to, at least.

What Rome said didn’t comfort me. Didn’t make me any less embarrassed about bleeding on Damien’s cock.

I clamp my mouth shut, my eyes next. Shielding myself against the humiliating scene.

“Eyes on Rome, darling.” Damien bites my forearm. “Mouth open wide. You need to taste yourself. Taste us.”

“You asked for all of me?” Rome seethes, driving himself harder into me. Bottoming out every single time. “This. Is. It.”

Rome’s cock grazes that spot that sends electricity racing down to my toes. And he doesn’t stop there. His hand is around my throat. His chest muscles pump with the effort.

He’s finally letting go, and I get to watch him do just that.

“You have me.” He chokes me. Grinds his groin on my clit. “You have me. Every cruel, merciless, violent part of me is yours. Including sucking on Damien’s fingers while I’m balls deep inside you. Wiping him clean of your blood. Of the evidence that you’ve always belonged to us.”

Less and less air filters through my nostrils. My eyes bulge as they dance between Rome, my bloodied fingers, and Liam who jerks off on the chair. Patient. So patient.

“Open.” Rome’s voice rises. His thrusts go deeper and deeper. Like he means to grind my body into the rug. “Fucking open up, sweetheart. You’ll look so perfect with Dame’s fingers in your mouth. With your lips painted red. Let me see your hymen there while I’m fucking babies into you.”

Once again, the idea of being pregnant by either one of them doesn’t register.

It’s impossible to focus on anything other than Rome. Impossible to refuse him. The man who unlocks another orgasm, setting me free from my body for the millionth time today.

I have to breathe through this climax if I want to survive this. If I want to survive him.

“Oh,” I yell through clenched teeth.

Rome loosens his grip on my throat, and with the fresh wave of air, my orgasm intensifies. It becomes a force as demanding and as ruthless as Rome is. I need air.

And I open my mouth. Damien’s fingers are there before I can snap it shut. I taste my arousal on my tongue. Taste Damien’s salty cum.

My mortification dissipates the longer Damien finger-fucks my mouth. The longer Rome’s adoring gaze stays on my lips.

“That’s it,” he praises. Then to Damien, “On her lips. Whatever’s left, paint her lips red.”

I get so hot when they talk about me like I’m not there. I’m sick to love it. Sick to have been craving the attention of these bad, terrible people.

Except they’re not the villains. Not really.

They’re insane. They’re violent.

I want them to keep me.

I don’t know what it makes of me.

Oh, but I do.

It makes me just as insane as they are.

“What do you think, Rome?” Damien looks down at me. Treats me as he would treat a piece of furniture. Maybe one of his suits. “Red enough for you?”

Rome thickens inside me, and I spread my legs wider. Not like it helps. He’s huge. He’d never fit. “Fucking perfect.”

“Eyes on him.” Damien nudges my cheek so I’m only looking at Rome.

“Fuck.” He fills me up, the second man to ever release his orgasm inside me. I’m sore and swollen and crying again, and I never want it to end. “Fuck, Quinlan. You have such a perfect cunt. Ours.”

A shadow comes over us. Liam. He’s completely naked. Every inch of him is hard. His cock. His long legs are toned and lean. His stomach and chest look like they’ve been carved out of marble. And his eyes. Two embers. Intense. Hungry.

Having another one of these men inside me could tear me in half. I reach my hand out for him, anyway. I need him. “Please.”

Rome’s smirk widens. He lowers his mouth to mine for a rough, short kiss and leaves me.

“Would you look at that.” Liam crawls up my body. He flips me on my stomach, sits up on his knees and pulls me to his chest. “I ended up getting your consent.”

“You left me no choice,” I say, though it’s a lie. A breathless lie no one in this room believes. Least of all me.

“You’re such a brat, little flame.” He positions the crown of his dick to my soaked opening. Damien’s there. Rome’s there. I’m there. Liam’s next. “Let’s see how you take it when I fuck you like one.”

Rome’s tucked himself in and put his shirt on. He and Damien are perched against the desk, both men watching us.

A week ago, I would’ve been embarrassed from being like this. On display. Shared. I would’ve run out of here. Hidden in a faraway place.

“We’re way past that, Quinlan. Past being self-conscious.” Liam shifts my hair back, his hot mouth on my neck. I shiver in his hold. “You came so pretty on my friends’ cocks. I could practically taste your screams. No need to play coy. Now…”

Liam’s hand covers my sensitive, abused breast. He uses it to lift me higher. Uses his other hand to grip his cock and shove an inch inside me.

“Would you like to be fucked”—he emphasizes the word that turns dirtier when it’s spoken from his mouth—“like brats deserve to be fucked?”

“Yes.” My head falls back on his shoulder, eyes staring straight ahead at the other two men. “Yes.”

“Yes what?” The torment of not having Liam almost inside me turns and shifts. Becomes unbearable. “Say it.”

“I want you to fuck me like the brat I am.”

No praise. No warning.

I get nothing before Liam impales me down his length.

“Yes. Oh, *yes*, beautiful.” His hand clamps on my breast in a bruising grip.

He inhales, and that’s all the time he gives me to adjust to him. He keeps me upright while he’s driving into me.

“You’re so wet. So tight.” This angle is different. He sinks deeper inside me. “Your virgin pussy is too fucking sweet. You should be worshipped. Should be loved. I wish I could give you that. I will give you that. Another day.”

My vision blurs around the edges. The pain and harsh, brutal thrusts hurt worse than I’ve imagined they would. I squirm. I try to escape the searing

pain inside me.

“Too much,” I cry out. “It’s too much. Stop, please.”

The expressions on Damien’s and Rome’s faces are blank. Impassive. They don’t care that Liam’s stretching me beyond what I can take. They love it.

“I told you I won’t stop.” His mouth parts on my shoulder. He sucks on my flesh. Hard enough to bruise. Hard enough for me to scream. “Don’t worry, though, little flame. We know what you need. We told you that. You need it rough. You need the tears. You need catharsis. We’ll always be here to give it to you.”

Always. He suggests that I never leave here.

I’m scared.

Of his threat. Of him. There’s no escaping the pain Liam administers.

His silence is misleading. A ruse. He has a lot to say. When he’s fucking me.

His body is a machine. His cock is a weapon. One he drives into me again and again.

“Ride Liam’s cock,” Damien demands, his sapphire eyes twinkling. “You take it so well. Such a pretty little whore. Our beautiful girl.”

“Fuck, I wish you could see yourself,” Rome adds, his hand rubbing his scruff. “You’re black and blue all over. Your pussy is red and so goddamn pretty. It has to hurt. But Liam’s there. Liam’s there and you’re going to be a good girl and orgasm on his dick.”

I do. Except Liam doesn’t just bring me over the edge. Doesn’t just coax an orgasm out of me. There’s nothing subtle about this climax. Nothing sweet or gentle or calm. It hurts so much more than being fucked by him. Coming for him slices right through the middle of my body, tearing me in half.

I fall back on him and cry harder. Liam sees it as his sign to give me everything he’s got. His thrusts are vicious. His arms, hands, and fingers pinch and knit and grip onto me. Wherever they can reach, that’s where he’s tormenting me.

“You’re ours.” He pulls my head to the side, kissing me. Soothing me. Coming inside me so hard I feel it in my womb. “You’re ours.”

The two others walk toward us when Liam lifts me. They take me to someone’s bathroom. Help me shower. Brush my hair. Dry me up.

My three captors tuck me into my bed, taking turns kissing me one by one.

They say things. They sound sweet.

Too bad I’m past hearing any of it.

The exhaustion is overwhelming. Seconds after my head hits the pillow, I pass out.

Blissfully so.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Quinlan

"WELL, THAT'S JUST NOT very nice of you, is it?" I ask my right wrist as I massage the sore area. "You had a full day off yesterday. This pinching isn't allowed, mister."

My wrist doesn't answer. I don't feel any crazier for it. After an entire day on my own, I think I've finally gained some of my sanity back.

Especially since no one's been an asshole to me. Quite the opposite. This comfortable work chair, this amazing desk that goes up and down whenever my back starts acting up. These men thought and cared that I had the best working conditions.

No one forced me to go to the bathroom in front of them. I woke up to presents and breakfast and a note, for fuck's sake.

As I look outside at the night sky, I go over the words I've memorized over the past day.

Little captive,

Eating is non-negotiable. We aren't going to force you to eat. Won't stick a funnel in your mouth and choke you on a protein shake to keep you alive, although Damien would like that very much.

We do, however, have creative ways of making you eat. Willingly.

You're welcome to try us. We'd love to demonstrate.

After you eat, your new laptop awaits. Everything you need has been installed on it, and it's already connected to the Wi-Fi network here. The

instructions, guidelines and information about BLF Capital has been arranged in a folder for you to look at. We're available to answer any question you might have.

But only once you've finished your breakfast.

You will be punished if you do it the other way around.

I did eat. In fact, I even ventured to the kitchen in the afternoon to grab myself something to eat before the men returned.

My heart hurt at the sight of their kitchen.

So much food was piled on the shelves of the pantry. A floor-to-ceiling worth of dried and canned food, cookies, granola and protein bars, bread, bagels, coffee and tea boxes to last for decades.

The fridge was just as heavily stocked. Vegetables, fruit, three gallons of milk, orange, tomato and some unidentified green juice. Eggs. A million condiments. Containers upon containers of prepped meals.

Last but not least, the freezer. Meat, fish, chicken and vegetables. Ice cream containers of Cookie Dough, Cherry Garcia, Chunky Monkey, plain vanilla, and chocolate.

Food hoarding. That was what I witnessed there, what led me to this simple realization. Insisting that I eat wasn't a control thing. That was someone's response to trauma I was looking at.

Damien didn't say anything about Rex starving him. Maybe he did. Maybe Rome or Liam were deprived of food.

That, too, pained me. I had nothing to do about it, though, not while I was home alone. So I threw myself into work and made sure the outside world didn't have a meltdown over me being gone.

First thing I did was email my parents and their doctors, then Ray. My clients' questions and issues were resolved quickly. The rest of the day revolved around building BLF Capital's website from scratch.

I wasn't allowed to email Rex, and I didn't want to. Didn't have it in me to soothe him, tell him I'm doing okay here. He'd never been the best brother, the best man. I made excuses for him. I'd lived with the way he was.

Torturing kids? Fuck. No. The sinking feeling in my stomach wouldn't go away. It just wouldn't. I believed Damien. The barely contained pain in his voice was all the proof I needed.

"Come on, wrist, get better. We have long weeks ahead of us."

My wrist sticks to its silence. I do the same, saying nothing while I massage the area. I'm being unfair, blaming my poor wrist for the damage I'd done to it.

Well, not really damage. It's about to get better in three, two, one… There it is. The tightness around the ligaments eases. Perfect.

"Why didn't we go to dinner, you ask?" Jesus, I've resulted into an in-depth conversation with my wrist. "Because—" I start and stop.

Someone might be watching me. They might be monitoring the laptop. I wouldn't put it past them.

I can't give them the answer, for the same reason I didn't join them for dinner and ate the one that was left outside my room by myself.

Privacy. I need it. At least some sense of it. A day or two to be alone with my thoughts. I lost my virginity yesterday to not one but three men. I've been turned into a pawn in someone's revenge plot. My freaking brother abused kids. *Kids*.

Damn it. Damn it all to hell.

It angers me that they just ripped me from my life. That they've been stalking me. That they didn't ask, that they assumed I'd need them. They had no right.

And yet…I'm no monster.

And neither are they. They tucked me in last night. They emailed me, each one of them, this evening, saying I'm doing a great job.

The men who are responsible for the soreness between my legs. For the black and blue bruises on my flesh.

A strange emotion tugs at my heart. A longing. A pull.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. It's all wrong to miss Damien's wicked, playful expression. Liam's glares. The pressure of Rome's hand around my throat.

But I do. I miss them. These men said *things* to me yesterday. Words that sounded a lot like promises. They were promises.

They don't hate me. It wouldn't be that bad, that *wrong*, to show my face. Talk to them. Right?

My feet work faster before common sense can answer that question.

Another second of hesitation, and I won't be brave enough to leave this room.

I'll go crazy if I won't. That's a scary realization.

It's all I have.

Seeking them out is a risky move. They're volatile. There's no telling which one of them is up at this hour, what version of them I'll be getting. Whether they be kind or aggressive or flat-out unhinged.

I'm taking my chances, anyway. Walking toward the door of my bedroom, not bothering to change out of my jeans and gray T-shirt. Bra? Who needs those? Not me. I pull on my hairband, releasing my hair down my back, running my fingers through it.

No dresser barricades my door today. No one violated me in my sleep. No one barged in this morning. They could've, and instead they let me be.

The door opens in a soft *whoosh*.

No one's waiting for me outside my room, but I can't assume they're not here. Stalkers don't just announce themselves. They tricked me yesterday. They could, and probably would, do it again.

The stairwell is ten steps away when I hear it. Rustling papers. A grunt. Pacing. A thud as a man's body meets the sofa.

Damien's and Liam's bedroom doors are closed—the usernames on Damien's and Rome's laptops gave them away yesterday. It isn't them. I won't barge in, just in case they're sleeping.

On top of not being a monster, I'm not rude. I could've come out of my room earlier, at a decent hour. I didn't. So no, I won't wake them.

Rome, he hasn't turned in yet. I'm going to…do what exactly? Sit next to him? Ask him about his day? Ask for answers, politely this time?

No idea.

My instincts push me forward, so I follow.

"No." The frustration in his voice is palpable, stopping me at the top of the stairs. "Absolutely not."

Who is he talking to? Is he on the phone? He could be talking to himself, like I did. It could be it.

On the first floor, I see him as well as hear him. He's sitting on the sofa, his large back to me. His head is tipped back, his black T-shirt stretching around his shoulders.

I'm being a peeping Tom, standing here without announcing myself. Then again, these men had me fucking stalked. I'd say I've earned it.

"Anne, you don't have to come." The phone isn't pressed to his ear. He's using earbuds, then. "No. You know what, don't. It won't do you any good. Why—I—please, for the love of God, don't fight me on this. I don't want you to be there. I have this."

He doesn’t want her there. There as in here? I never thought it could be a bachelor pad, but his phone call is slowly changing my mind.

My feet plant me in place. My heart races.

I’m jealous.

I resent being kidnapped. Hate being kept in the dark. They’ve wronged me.

And I can’t stop this ridiculous jealousy from creeping up on me.

They were mine yesterday. All over me. We bonded, in a bizarre, unique kind of way.

Rome kissed me in the middle of the street for everyone to see.

But I’m not the only one, apparently.

The woman on the other line can’t be the little girl in the photo. Or maybe she is? Maybe she’s Liam’s sister or something, all grown up. Dating Rome.

She could be his wife. Bile rises in my throat. She could be living in a different city or state. She could have no idea what her husband is doing to me. And Liam approves of this sick behavior.

Anne. That’s what he called her.

I’m sorry, Anne. I apologize to her over and over in my head.

The territorial feeling doesn’t go away, as sincere as it is. This possessiveness isn’t a switch I can flip off.

Going back to my bedroom would be the smart move.

Stay up there, do my job, get paid. I’m not here to have fun. I’m not here to fall in love. They sure don’t love me.

They said I belonged to them. Like property. Like a mistress.

One step, then another. I walk backward, returning to safety. To being by myself, like I’m used to.

Except I’m doing it all wrong. I’m too shocked, too hurt to be stealthy. My left foot lands on the step in a stomp, the sound loud in the quiet penthouse.

Rome’s back goes ramrod straight instantly. His head snaps back in my direction, dark blue eyes narrowing.

I was right. He does have his earbuds plugged in.

Fuck, what am I thinking about? Who cares about the earbuds?

I care for him. I… Damn it. I care.

While he’s on the phone with another woman.

It’s possible I’m the worst, most pathetic case of Stockholm syndrome out there. And I’ve been their captive for less than forty-eight hours.

Have I mentioned pathetic? Maybe. It’s worth repeating anyway.

Pathetic.

That’s what I am.

“Anne, I’ll call you back,” Rome says. *Oh no*. He’s going to hang up. He’s going to come over here, and I’m frozen in place. “Yeah, love you too.”

Love you.

This is it. These are the words that snap me out of it. I spin on my heel and launch myself up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

I’ll be in my bedroom in less than a minute. Barricaded. Protected.

My heart won’t feel as raw and exposed.

Adrenaline floods my veins. The dim lights on the second floor shine brighter from it. My pulse is a drum beating in my ears. I hear it so loudly.

I make it to the landing, one foot up there and—

“No, you don’t.” A large hand—a manacle—closes around my arm. Hauls me into the sturdiest chest I’ve ever collided with. Rome’s lips are in my ear. “You’re not going anywhere, sweetheart.”

“Leave me alone.” My attempt at sounding in control fails. Epically. There’s a lilt to my voice that exposes my pain. “Put me down, fucker.”

“How about no.” The way he folds me into his arms is possessive. His front is pressed to my back, and he picks me up off the stairs easily. I weigh nothing compared to him. All muscle. All fury. “Here’s another no for you, sweetheart. I’m not mad at you.”

“You?” I twist my head, though I don’t get very far. Strands of my hair cover my eyes. “Mad at me? That’s rich.”

“Yes, I’m not mad.” Rome carries me downstairs as I kick and wiggle in his hold. I don’t scream. Last thing I need is the other men coming to help him.

This cheater.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I hiss. “Why would *you* be mad at *me*?”

“You refused to eat last night.” Such a simple explanation. His voice is smooth, confident without a hint of anger. “You made up for it with your pussy. And by eating today. You’re such a good girl when you want to be.”

We’re on the first floor, and he flips me effortlessly. One of his arms goes beneath my thighs, the other supporting my back. His stormy eyes are as

calm as his voice is. A rock, despite the hell I put him through.

Me, on the other hand, am still riled up. Can't forget this man is a cheater.

"Fuck you." We pass by the living room, where his laptop and papers are scattered. Papers he talked to Anne about. Jealousy and rage work their way through my body. My nails claw at his shoulders. "Let me down, asshole."

"I thought we were over this. Over you pretending to hate being here." My butt slams against the dark marble kitchen counter. A hand on my hip hauls me to Rome. His other hand cups my cheek, tilting my head up to him. "Do you need a reminder for how much you like your kidnappers? Need me to lick your needy pussy until you remember?"

The nerve on this guy. A scowl curves my lips downward. I'm dead-set on hiding how hot I am for him. How his words affect me. How his masculine scent sends heat through my body. How his lips are so close that I just *have* to taste them.

I hide it, because he's been hiding Anne from me first.

"We're not over anything." I glower at him, hiding my pain. "First off, you three have given me, what, thirty-six hours? To be okay with being kidnapped?"

An hour ago, I would've never said that. I felt at home, sort of. I wasn't angry.

Things have changed since.

A lot of things.

Curiosity swirls in Rome's eyes as he studies me. I try my best to not give him anything. He sees it anyway.

When understanding flashes behind them, I know I'm fucked.

"What do we have here?" Rome's thumbs stroke my feverish skin. "This isn't being a captive at all, is it?"

His nose brushes mine, and I bite on the inside of my cheek. I won't moan for this cheater. I won't.

"Of course it is." Jerking my body gets me nowhere. "Let me go."

"Not before you tell me what's bothering you."

Indignance and loathing. And jealousy. My God, am I jealous.

"Tell. Me." He shakes my head. His jaw tics. "I'm not going anywhere until you do, and neither are you, sweetheart. You better start talking."

The raging beat of my heart and his fill the air.

"Let me see. You expected me to wait outside your room? You're mad that I didn't?" How dare he? He raised my hopes and crushed them even

faster, and here he is, suggesting that I've missed him. "If you wanted me to climb inside your bed and wake you with my cock in your mouth, sweetheart, all you had to do was ask."

Humiliation burns as hot as my arousal.

Anger triumphs them both.

Love you.

"Go to hell."

He pushes my legs to the side. They stay there, since my brain isn't functioning the way it should. I'm hot and angry and butthurt.

Rome takes advantage of that. With way too much ease, his hand is on my hip again and he yanks me to him. Forces himself between my thighs.

We glare at each other, our bodies touching. Two people caught in the eye of the storm. I smell the mint on his breath. See the darkness in him. The violence.

"Last chance." His lips almost touch mine as his hand slides low. Down my jaw. Wrapping around my throat. "Or you're going to pay for this. For withholding answers from me. From us."

Taken. He's taken.

"Okay, then." He bites my bottom lip, and for one long second, I don't fight back. To my shame, he's the one to pull away from me. "You've earned this, sweetheart, what's coming to you next. The pain. The tears. You'll come and it'll hurt. You'll orgasm over and over until you beg me to stop. Fair warning, I will not. Is that what you want?"

Yes. "No. I don't want you to touch me."

"Liar." His thumb trails dangerously close to the waistline of my jeans, and I gasp. "This is your last chance. Talk."

"I thought you knew everything about me," I spit out.

"If we could get inside your head, trust that we would." His skilled fingers reach to the button of my jeans. Dragging the zipper down. Baring me to him. "Asking you is all I have to work with."

"Interrogating me."

His fingers tease the waistband of my panties. Promising me he'll take me when and however he likes if I don't answer him.

"Stop it."

Rome's lips graze my jaw, and fuck. My teeth lock. My body breaks in tremors.

“Why won’t you be a good girl?” His eyes rise to meet mine, his fingers pinching my clit through my panties. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

He moves my panties to the side, pinching my clit again. I scream, and he doesn’t slam my mouth shut with his hand. He shoves two fingers down my throat instead. So deep that I gag. So deep that tears sting my eyes. Spit dribbles down my chin. My breaths are ragged.

Nothing’s stopping me from punching him. My hands aren’t tied. He isn’t holding me down.

I’ll do it. Right after I tell him he’s a cheating motherfucker.

“Fine,” I murmur, the word coming out garbled.

Rome drags his fingers out of my mouth. “What was it, pretty girl?”

“Pretty girl? I thought I was *sweetheart*.” I throw a punch at his chest. Nothing happens to this wall. Nothing. I go a second time. Third. Still nothing. “You got the nicknames mixed up, didn’t you? That’s how little you care about *her*.”

For a moment, he’s stumped. Eyebrows knitting. Eyes searching my face.

“Oh.” A low, husky laugh. “Fucking adorable, sweetheart.” Understanding turns his features sharp and lethal. “You’re so fucking adorable when you’re jealous. Even if you’re dead wrong about it.”

Rome shoves his fingers into my mouth again.

This time, though, he’s grinning while he does.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Rome

THE DAY THE THREE of us agreed that Quinlan Palmer had to be taken, my mind began working overtime. Plenty of scenarios came to mind.

In most of them, she'd fight us.

Granted, I never wanted her to. I've been obsessed with her for years.

But I was under no illusions that she'd give in easily.

Having not one but three men forcing her to live in their apartment. Ripping her away from her life. Blackmailing her into this situation.

Of course she'd fight us.

This particular scenario, however, never played in my head.

She's jealous after less than two days here with us.

And I'm not the only one taken aback by it. She looks shocked.

I guess yesterday meant as much to her as it did to us.

Fuck, I love that.

"No," she mumbles on my fingers. "Not. Wrong."

"My, my." I don't tell her she's wrong again. That Anne is my sister.

This warmth in my heart. I'm holding on to it. So I fuck her mouth slowly. Drag my fingers on her tongue, in and out.

"Jealous little thing. Are you the possessive type, Quinlan? You'll do anything to have us all to yourself?"

Her eyes flare. She tries to shake me off, hands clawing at my wrist.

I’m hard as a fucking rock. I can barely think. Barely breathe. My sanity is hanging by a thread. And I’m a sick bastard. I need to hurt her. Need her soaking my fingers. My cock.

In the middle of the kitchen.

Anywhere.

Liam’s out, stalking Harmony, the woman who will help me get my revenge, then he has Ray to check up on. He wanted to personally make sure neither one of them is blabbering about us or Quinlan.

Damien is upstairs. He must’ve already heard everything.

He could decide to walk in on us any minute now. A smirk graces my face. The more, the merrier.

“Ah, I see.” My thumb goes under her chin, locking her in place. She’s so sweet, the way she chokes on me. The way she fights. “That *was* jealousy.”

She growls.

“Territorial.” I hook my fingers under the waistband of her thin cotton panties. They tear without resistance. We bought this brand for a reason. “Is it just for me, or do you feel the same for Liam and Damien?”

“Fuck you.”

I bury my fingers deeper down her throat. The fingers I have on her clit slide lower, parting her lips for me. I push into her heat without a warning. Groan when she clenches around me.

“Soaked.” When I start finger fucking her pussy and mouth, Quinlan softens for me. Just a little. “You’re enjoying this.”

Her anger remains. It’s a beautiful thing.

But she can’t resist me.

I can’t resist her either. Can’t do a damn thing about this obsession. The pounding in my chest. The overwhelming desire.

“So tight.” She clamps around me at that, groaning. Frustrated. Mesmerizing. “You took three cocks last night in this tight little pussy. Does it hurt? Having my fingers inside you?”

Her cheeks flush, her teeth clamp on my fingers.

“Poor Quinlan, you must be sore.”

She whimpers, gripping me tighter for leverage so she can tilt her hips up.

“You want more.” I shove her on her back. With my fingers still deep in her mouth, I wrangle her jeans off her legs. Drive two fingers into her cunt and curl them inside her, stroking her walls. “Are you a whore for pain, Quinlan?”

“I hate you,” she murmurs, kicking me in the stomach.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.” My palm is flat on her belly, pinning her to the hard surface. Fucking her with the fingers of my other hand. “You’re gorgeous when you’re mad.”

“Mad about what? Or who?” Damien strolls into the kitchen, casual in a pair of gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt. A smirk on his face. “Is there any chance it’s me? Sure fucking hope so.”

Quinlan turns her head to Damien. After my so-called betrayal, she frowns at him. Probably for helping me *hide* my *other lover*.

Another “Fuck you” leaves her lips.

“Fuck me?” Damien’s smooth, prowling toward us. He comes to our side of the counter, grabs Quinlan’s arm, and together, we shift her so she lies parallel to the edge.

“Yes,” she breathes easier without my fingers in her mouth.

“That’s not a nice thing to say.” He doesn’t miss a beat, pulling on her bottom lip and spits into her mouth. Slams her lips shut. “Not nice at all.”

Her eyes are wide, her body thrashing. She screams into his hand.

“Especially since you’ve been bad tonight.” My mouth is on her pussy, ignoring her small kicks, her useless struggle. I look up, her arousal damping my lips. “Sneaking around. Eavesdropping.”

“Snooping? Again?” I hear the smirk in Damien’s voice rather than see it.

“Wasn’t”—*moan*—“snooping.”

I’m busy kissing Quinlan’s pretty pussy in this new angle. Rubbing her G-spot over and over, my fingers up to the second knuckle. I suck on her clit, and Quinlan’s scream reaches all the way to my balls.

She makes me painfully hard. My cock strains against my sleep pants. I need to be inside her. I need to keep playing this game just as much.

“So, what was it you heard, darling?” Damien kisses up her jaw. Shoves her face to the side, licking her tattoo. Sucking on it.

My fucking God. I raise my mouth, saying, “She thinks I’m married. Or have a girlfriend.”

“Is that so?” The teasing in his voice almost lands him a punch in the face.

He catches her fist, unclenches her fingers and sucks on her middle finger.

“Anne,” she whispers. I bet it drives her crazy, this jealousy. This possessiveness.

Join the club. We've had years of that. Of watching, waiting. Needing her so bad it became hard to breathe some days. At work, the three of us talked about it briefly.

She was so beautiful in her photos. Mesmerizing. We've been jealous of her fucking mailman.

We've wanted her.

We're taking her.

My mouth is on her again, my fingers relentless inside her cunt. I lick and suck, her juices coating my lips. My chin. I look up at her, watching Damien tearing her shirt down the middle.

She tries to stop him like she tries to stop her orgasm, but fails both. After the first tear in the collar of her shirt, Damien pins her wrists over her head and rips the rest in half.

One of her nipples is in his mouth. Between the two of us, Quinlan loses the fight. She cries out the moment her orgasm barrels into her, cursing. Resenting us for giving her pleasure. Demanding more of it. Her legs fly open, back arching.

"Sweet Quinlan." Damien waits for me to lick her off, for her body to settle.

"Don't patronize me," she groans, her voice hoarse. Her throat must be sore from my abuse. From screaming.

"Patronizing you is the last thing on my mind." He loops his arms around her, picking her up off the kitchen island. He slides his hands under her ass to support her. To cradle her in the air.

The orgasm has her pliable. Angry and limp in his arms. Soft. Beautiful. She gives him permission to carry her. Doesn't kick him.

She's hardly scowling at me as I stalk them into the living room.

She's sated. I'm anything but. The pressure in my pants and the need to hurt her won't go away. The underlying violence is just as persistent as the dreams I've had of her.

Her womb filled with our cum. Her belly swollen. Our babies growing inside her.

Fuck.

Damien isn't planning to go easy on her. He makes it clear by releasing her—no, tossing her—on the sofa.

"Asshole." Quinlan, naked and gorgeous, struggles to sit up. To stand.

“That’s right, I am.” Damien has his hands on her shoulders. Shoving her back down. “Not a condescending one.”

She sits on the sofa, bare and beautiful. Her juices drip down her crack to the cushion, and my cock jerks. Black and blue bruises decorate her tits. Hair wild.

Hair that’s mine to torture. I wind it in my fist, my eyes boring into hers.

I tug on it, marveling at her glossy eyes. “I don’t have a girlfriend, or a wife, or a motherfucking mistress. No one.” *For so many years, no one’s existed but you.* “Do you understand?”

“Don’t give a fuck.” Her nose scrunches at that. Her lips purse. “Screw around all you want.”

“She really is jealous.” Damien slides his hand to her chin, his thumb stroking along her cheek. “Looks so good on you, darling. We should’ve kidnapped you much sooner. Should’ve had you here long before now. I can’t believe we’ve missed out on this.”

Quinlan’s eyelashes flutter, lips parting. His possessiveness does that to her.

But the arousal on her expression doesn’t last. “I’m not jealous.”

Her denial is equally adorable. I could drag it out, sure. I can lie, say I did have someone. That my friends fucked around too.

It’d be a pleasure, lying to her. If this is the reward we get for our efforts.

And cruel. Unnecessarily cruel. She was damn near devastated back then, on the stairs. I won’t do that to her anymore. I’ll hurt her body. Bruise her. Belt her. I’ll never damage her soul.

“Listen to me.” I cup her cheek, haul her closer by her hair. “No one. There hasn’t been anyone for a long while. For the three of us.”

“You…” she whispers, hope bursting from her eyes. “You’re not lying, are you?”

I could die. Right here in our living room. No one’s ever tugged on my heartstrings like Quinlan does. No one. No one’s ever needed as intensely and desperately as she does.

I’d been there to protect Anne over the years. An unrelenting force, no matter how starved I’d been myself. I’d stayed there with her, since no judge would sign her over to me without proof of neglect. I was forced to throw up, too. Hadn’t eaten for days, sneaking the last granola bars in my stash and giving them to her.

My friends had never needed me once we were out of high school. We were a team. A strong one. Liam found small companies we could start with. Damien convinced the owners to sell their shares to us when we were basically kids. My grandparents broke my trust fund to help us build BLF. My punches and threats did the rest. But Liam and Damien could've done it without me.

Quinlan is something else. Her need is nothing like theirs. She needs me for *me*. She needs me to tell her we weren't messing with her head yesterday. That we meant it. That I'm hers. That she's ours, even if she hates it.

"I am. It was my sister on the line. Anne." We work together, Damien and me. Bring Quinlan to the floor, on her hands and knees. "The one you saw in the picture yesterday."

The papers and my laptop on the table are poisonous. Filth.

They don't touch me. It stays far, far away when I have Quinlan on all fours and my hands cupping her cheeks.

The relief on her face is intoxicating. She'll put up a fight once she's not high on orgasms and desperate for more. I'm sure of that. For now, she's relieved. For now, she relents.

"We belong to you. We have, for a long time."

Gray eyes widen below me. Understanding dawns behind them. Understanding… and hesitation.

"You don't trust us." Damien drops to his knees, his hands on her ass. I lower to my knees, still holding her face in my palms. "We expected this."

"You know everything about me," she accuses him while staring into my eyes. "The three of you."

This is wrong, confessing to what we've been up to without Liam here. He'll be happy, though. He'll have time to talk to her, too.

She's never leaving.

"We've had private investigators following you," I tell her this truth. My fingers sink into her cheeks, where she's blushing. Damien runs his hand along the curve of her back. Of her ass. "Every move you've made since you turned eighteen. Every business meeting. Whenever you jog. Ate. Worked at home. We were so proud of you when you opened your own business."

"Wha—"

Her question transforms into a moan, getting louder and more desperate the harder I kiss her. It's turning into a gasp as one of my hands lowers to the side of her neck and cuts off some of her air supply.

"When you showered." Damien's voice cuts through the hungry sounds she and I are making. "Don't forget about that, Rome."

Her eyes snap open. Brow furrowed. "Your investigators watched me shower?"

I narrow my eyes at Damien, pretending I'm angry. I'm not. He's the one who put this beautiful expression on her face. The fear and indignation, and fuck, it's sweet. She has no problem with us watching her naked. Stalking her in the shower.

It's the others she's angry about.

"No one." He's naked from the waist down, his sweats and boxers shoved low on his hips. He's tugging one of Quinlan's butt cheeks to the side with one hand, stroking himself with the other.

I'm not attracted to him. The way he handles her, how he's readying himself to sink into her pussy. That's what gets me even harder. Feral. He's so thick, I know it's going to hurt her.

"Only us." My mouth demands hers. My teeth need those plump lips to bite on. To devour her. I kiss her the way I'm craving. We're lips, tongues, teeth. She fights me, this little one. This beating heart. "We had a camera there."

"Why me?" she asks between kisses.

This isn't the right moment. We've said too much already anyway. Who fucking knows if the next words either of us says will be the last straw?

She can't run from us. She can't.

I'm on my feet, casting my shadow over her. Darkness over light. Without another word, I push my pants and boxers to the floor. Tug on her bottom lip.

Dame and I communicate through our eyes.

"What did Rex—"

I push my hips forward. Damien thrusts his too. We're inside her mouth. In her pussy. Filling her up.

Quinlan's gagging. Choking. Gasping for air. But she gives in. She lets us move in and out of her, fuck her hot, wet holes.

"You feel so good, sweetheart," I groan, fucking her mouth.

"God, too fucking good."

The first *crack* of Damien's palm on her ass makes my eyes roll back with pleasure. I force them back on her. She's beautiful. I love seeing my hand wrapped in her hair while my hips fuck her mouth.

While her eyes tear up for me. While she hollows her cheeks for me.

"I want you, darling. Have wanted you for years." It's easier for him to confess like this. From behind her. Her eyes blink, a tear dropping from one of them. His words mean something to her. "Have loved you more than that. Fuck, I never said that. Never let myself think that. You're my everything. You've been everywhere. Watching you shower has been fucking nothing, Quinlan, nothing compared to having you here. Finally. Goddamn finally."

I'm not sure he realizes what he's saying. His voice is strained, the words raw and real. I tear my gaze from Quinlan, looking at his lips pulled in a tight line, hands running reverently on her ass, her hips. Then—

Another *crack*. Quinlan jerks forward on me, her teeth grazing my length.

"Ah, yes, sweetheart." I swipe a finger over her heart tattoo, pounding deeper down her throat. Wiping out the bad memories and replacing them with us. "You have such a perfect mouth. You take me so well. Teeth and all. Lick the bottom. Suck. Yes, just like that. Fuck, you're good. Fuck, you're ours."

There are many words in the English language. None of them could explain the things that Quinlan does to my heart.

It's in her obedience. It's in the way her lips wrap around my cock and how she keeps taking it. Despite the tears in her eyes. Despite struggling with being a sex doll between Damien and me.

She has my heart in her goddamn hands. Just by existing.

A groan. A choked, furious sound. It comes from Damien whose eyes are so dark, they're nearly black. Quinlan's are just as dark, just as starving. His cock is wet with her arousal.

And I'm curious. So goddamn curious. "Is she dripping, Damien?"

"No." My friend doesn't meet my gaze. He's fixated on her back. Her ass. His arm slides around her, his hand slipping between her thighs. "She's soaked. And close. Aren't you, darling?"

"Mmm," is the only response Quinlan can offer us. The only one available to her, with my cock stuffing her mouth. Her moan vibrates on my dick.

Knowing she's about to orgasm again makes the room hotter. Makes my throat lock up and the need to fill her mouth with my cum insufferable.

"You're going to be a good girl, Quinlan." She blinks for me. We've been stalking her, kidnapped her, and she still wants us. "Going to come with Damien tearing into your pussy. With your cock-sucking lips wrapped around me."

She whimpers, pursing her lips and sucking.

"Jesus fuck."

"Beautiful, beautiful Quinlan. I have so much cum for you. Going to give you babies." Damien rubs her clit, his thrusts quickening. "Do what Rome says. Be a good girl. Be our good little girl and, oh, *fuck*, yes."

I feel the moment Quinlan comes. Her throat constricts around the head of my cock. She cries and moans. Her mouth is full of me, but I hear her regardless.

More. Please. I've been needing this. Needing you.

"Look at you, being such a good girl," I praise, my voice husky. I'm there, thickening in her mouth. Pounding harder. "I'm coming. Fuck, I'm coming in your pretty mouth. Swallow it. Every drop, sweetheart. Everything."

My climax is a freight train. It explodes in my chest, sending one shock after the other through my body.

In the background, I hear Damien's groans and low curses as he orgasms. They're muffled, though. The whole world is a blur out except for her face.

Those swollen, stretched lips. Those fiery gray eyes. That throat working to keep my cum in her mouth. To swallow.

"Good fucking girl." I pull out when I'm done, as does Damien.

My pants are in place before I drop to the floor while he fingers her pussy, pushing his seed in. I want him to get her pregnant. I want all of us to get her pregnant.

"I swear." Her cheeks are in my hands, my lips brushing hers. "There's been no one but you for years, little captive."

Damien gets up. Tucks himself in.

Hiding his scars with his clothes.

He comes around to her face, his fingers winding into Quinlan's mess of a hair, tugging until she's facing the ceiling. Looking directly at him.

He lowers himself to kiss her, his mouth slanting over hers. Coaxing her to open for him. To give in. To surrender.

Though I know he wishes she didn’t. Just so she would fight him.

For all the smiles he spreads, my best friend has a dark side lurking inside him.

“There won’t be anyone else.” There’s a finality in his voice.

It presses an invisible button inside Quinlan’s soul. One that switches on the tremors. The resilience.

Her eyes flash.

“When I leave…” she sighs, her eyes sad as she’s looking between us.

Not if. *When*. I pretend I don’t hear her saying that. No need to argue when she’s never leaving.

“There’ll be another man instead of you three.” This is her attempt to protect her heart against disappointment. I’m sure of it.

Damien told her all the right things. All the kind, loving words a woman like her deserves to hear.

He chooses a different approach to show her he cares, since the other one clearly didn’t work. His fist clenches in her hair, pulling harder.

“A man who’ll be kind and considerate to me. Who’ll—”

“Thank you, darling.” I see Damien hauling her off the floor before he even does that. She’s over his shoulder, and he slaps her ass while she shrieks. “You had me worried there for a moment. You were being too good. That wasn’t as fun for either of us, was it?”

“You psycho.” She punches his back. Kicks him. “Put me down! Rome!”

My lips remain pinched in a tight line.

Damien slaps her ass again.

“Assholes. Both of you.”

“There’ll be no other man. And compassion? Kindness? From us? Forget about that.” He climbs the stairs while he speaks. “You wouldn’t want us this way. You wouldn’t want anyone this way.”

I catch up to them. Damien takes her to her room, and I head over to his to get the red silk ropes he bought months ago. For her.

A wet cloth is the second item I bring with me.

“Someone else would treat me right,” she says. She *lies*.

“A pretty virgin like you.” My friend’s voice carries across the hall. “Getting off on filthy sex. Are you really going to sit there and tell me you’d prefer to be fucked sweetly? Cuddled later?”

I step through the doorway, smirking at the two of them. Damien stands near Quinlan’s bed, holding her over his shoulder. She kicks his stomach,

kneeing him in the chest.

It’s a futile attempt to get out of his grip. It doesn’t matter to Quinlan. The feisty girl doesn’t give up.

There isn’t a single cell in my body that’s disappointed in her rebellion.

This is her. This is us. Everything is exactly as it should be.

“First of all, I’m not sitting,” Quinlan growls, then gasps the moment her ass lands on her bed.

“Fixed that problem for you.” Damien tilts his head.

“How could you possibly know what I really want?” More lies. She knows we do. Her wet cunt is proof that we do. That we’ve given it to her.

“Quinlan.” I shove the ropes into Damien’s hand.

She doesn’t notice it. All she sees is me moving on top of her. My hand flattens on her chest, slowly pushing her until she’s flat on the bed. My mouth is a mere inch from hers.

“This fight of yours. It’s sweet.” I trace my thumb along her swollen lips, distracting her while Damien grabs one of her wrists and moves her on the bed.

Where he takes her, that’s where I go. My lips tug at the corner when he binds her wrist to one pole of the bed.

“I can’t wait to break you.” Quinlan starts to thrash, and I pin her down harder. “It would be my fucking pleasure to put you back together.”

“No,” she mouths.

I kiss the defiance out of her, stroking her thighs and pussy with the wet cloth. Cleaning her.

“Truly break.” Damien moves to the other side. Quinlan’s eyes are wide open, tracking his movements while I rub my tongue against hers.

The gravity of her situation is sinking in. She finally notices the ropes.

Our little captive tugs on her restraints. Attempting to free herself.

She doesn’t want to be released. We’re giving Quinlan what she craves. We stared into her eyes, saw the darkness within.

The days of being what Rex is expecting her to be are over. We’re here for her. Here to help her tap into the abyss. To transform her into the woman she was always meant to be.

We’ll take care of the rest for her. Her parents, the medical bills, anything at all.

The fact that having her here is destroying Rex in the process is a bonus.

No. It’s equally as important. The three of us are after both.

Her heart.

His death.

“Break, as in, you’ll forget all about the suburbs.” Damien sounds angrier. “About a white picket fence.”

He’s almost done, then holds back. Doesn’t move. I rise, twisting her face to him.

“You can also forget about fucking missionaries. Least of all”—Damien lowers his mouth, kissing the top of her foot, realizing she didn’t deserve his fury—“you can forget about Rex. You don’t answer to him. Never again.”

One ankle is bound to the pole.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” she whispers. She knows he does. She’s seen it in his eyes. “I don’t answer to anyone.”

Oh, but Damien has a very good idea what he’s talking about.

“You had to stay home. Had to take care of your parents. By yourself.” Her second ankle is bound, and Damien kisses the top of that foot too. I stand at the edge of the bed, and he’s right there next to me. “You never had a social life. He’s a lazy bastard. And you’re such a good girl.”

“You don’t understand.” Quinlan blinks hard, her face flustered. “It’s my—it’s—never mind.”

“We understand.” Bright red surrounds the heart tattoo beneath her eye, and I stroke the soft area with my lacerated knuckles. She shivers, and it sends a bolt of excitement through me. I’m hard again, but no. I won’t have her. “Just like we understand that deep down, you like this.” I gesture to the ties. “Being ours.”

“No.” She glowers at us, spitting fire.

Reminding me so much of our third friend.

“Liam needs to see this,” I tell Damien, before turning around and stalking out of the room.

I’m a lot of things. Harsh. Ruthless. Hotheaded.

But not selfish. Never that.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Liam

MY ZIPPO WEIGHS HEAVILY in my palm. My finger is hot on the lid. The impulse to flick it open, to light it, is ingrained into my bones.

It settled there after the flames the same Zippo brought ate up half of my cheek. When I decided I would control the pain, the fear, my past. That I wouldn't let it control me.

Playing with fire soothes me. Pacifies me.

The flame is an extension of my body. But at the present moment, I have to hide it. No one's supposed to see me in this dark alley, watching Rex. The flame would give me away.

The place is empty. Nothing's happening, really.

I'm not needed here.

For one, this is Damien's aggressor. This revenge is his. And he had his share of it today. My friend stood, I imagine, exactly where I am. Made a stop here after work to witness Rex losing his shit.

On the drive home, he called me, sounding pleased as fuck.

"We got under his skin," he said, laughing. "I'd say I feel bad for the barista he threw a mug at. Except I don't."

Then there's the matter of him calling his cop buddies. He hasn't. Our investigators assure us of that fact. The one who tails Rex until eleven at night reported back that he only called his father's psychiatrist. And no, he didn't know why his dad wasn't picking up.

We do. We have an investigator looking out after their home. Her parents are fine. They just overslept.

Back to Rex. So, no, other than not knowing, he also didn't feel like dropping by and check if he was alive or dead. A neighbor should help. Quinlan should've helped.

"She's on vacation, doesn't care about them." Those were his words before he hung up.

His half-sister was kidnapped, and the bastard felt justified in blaming her. In throwing her under the bus.

Hearing him shouldn't have surprised us. It did. It fucking did.

All those times he supposedly looked after her. The obsessive way he needed her near him. He was more than controlling her. He was using her.

While he gets to lead his miserable life in relative peace, his sister stresses over everything. Works her ass off at home, during Uber rides when her parents go long without picking up or attending their sessions.

She loves them, naturally. We thought that was what it was all about.

Nope. She has no one else to lean on.

Well, now she does. She has us.

And Damien has me to keep watch. To be here instead of home.

Right here.

Ray isn't an issue. Quinlan's email pacified her. She's in her apartment, toasting with her boyfriend. Happy about landing her new job.

The inside source that'll help take Rome's parents down is fast asleep. Hasn't tried reaching out and selling his information to anyone else. We're good on that front too. We paid him handsomely for that, and he's keeping his word.

With everything else settled, I'm here, spying on Rex. I'm suspicious and cautious of him. Of his compliancy.

This wasn't supposed to happen, me going rogue. Cracks in the plan could lead to one of us slipping up. But I'm not actually doing anything. I'm watching.

One of us should be here, and I decided that person is me. Damien deserves this night at home. With Quinlan. He's owed an ounce of peace for once in his goddamn life.

My hand rises to my cheek, fingertips brushing over the burn scar. The texture is nothing like Quinlan's skin. Hers is soft and silky. Smoother than anything I've ever touched.

Mine’s the opposite. The mangled skin is nothing but ridges, bumps, and taut scar tissue.

The fire caught on quickly to Mom’s clothes in the locked closet. The panic made it so I was frozen for long minutes. It didn’t help that no one heard my screams.

I close my eyes. Sometimes the scar is sensitive beneath my fingertips. That’s not the case when Quinlan strokes my skin. I’m back to being the kid I was before Aria barged into my life.

My eyes snap open. I’m here to watch over Rex, not to imagine my little flame holding me in her palm.

There it is. The anger. He unleashes his frustration at the café’s staff. His face twists in anger as he yells at them.

Maybe once they close for the day, he’ll go to the police station. It’s possible. I have to make sure he doesn’t, that he heads straight home from here.

Doesn’t bother me that I’m away from Quinlan. Doesn’t bother me at all that I can’t inhale the clean scent of her hair. The shampoo we got her that smells nothing like ashes and fire. Not being able to touch her or stare at her while she sleeps, that doesn’t bother me either.

I’m on a mission. I—

Fuck me. Who am I kidding?

My instincts scream to light a fire. My heart aches to be around Quinlan. Curl my body around her in bed.

Of course it bothers me that I’m away from her.

I’ll be with her. I’ll visit her at night.

I might even play. She’s so beautiful while she sleeps.

There’ll be time.

Rex slams a coaster too hard. It crashes on the floor. And my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Rome.

Strange. We’re days from laying the fatal blow on his father’s company. Ruin him and his mother. He’s supposed to be working on the final papers to send to the news reporter.

Rome never lets anyone interrupt him while he’s busy handling sensitive documents.

But this isn’t a voice call. It’s a video call, and that could only mean one thing. He’s with Quinlan. Possibly naked. Maybe railed by the two of them.

My cock throbs. My feet carry me deeper into the dark alley. Back, back, back until no one can see me. I'll follow up with Rex later. By the looks of it, they have another thirty minutes to close.

I go even deeper, to the back street where my SUV waits. I slip inside the car, my finger swipe across the screen.

"Rome?"

This isn't my friend's face on the screen.

She's there. Taking up every inch of the frame.

Spread eagle on her bed. Naked and bound to the frame.

Her eyes glare at me, accusing. Her lips are swollen. Patches of her skin are black and blue.

Her cunt. Fuck me, her cunt is red and soaked.

I'm a living wire. A bright flame.

My hand grips the phone so tight it could crack.

No more Rex. No more tight, pink scar. None of these bullshit memories of being left locked in the closet while listening to Aria making out with her boyfriend or laughing on the phone.

No darkness. No desperate, agonizing need to see something. Anything.

There's Quinlan. No one and nothing else.

How pretty is she when she screams. When she struggles against her restraints.

"Are you actually recording this?" she snarls. Rome must use the camera at the back of the phone. Quinlan has no idea I'm watching.

Her chest rises and falls with each harsh breath. "You can't do this to me, you freak."

You're so beautiful, though. Such a perfect captive. A contained little flame.

"We aren't recording you, darling. It's a video call," Damien speaks from somewhere behind the camera, his voice light. He's genuinely happy. "Couldn't let you go to sleep when you haven't said goodnight to Liam. It would be rude."

While he talks, he moves into the frame. He sits on the edge of the bed near Quinlan's face, his hand cupping her cheek. For the shortest second, she melts into him. Leans into his touch.

She shakes the uncontrollable reaction off fast, snapping her gaze to the camera. "Liam, they went behind your back. They fucked me."

“Such a clever one.” My thumb strokes the screen, caressing the spot where her face is. “Trying to make me jealous? Or are you begging me to come home to save you?”

“Yes.” Her growl is too goddamn cute. “Both.”

Damien shares my sentiment, leaning in to kiss her forehead. It’s the gentlest he’s ever been with anyone. He covers his emotion as fast as Quinlan hid hers. Straightens his spine, his expression cocky.

He’ll get used to this. To being soft. If only for her.

“Don’t waste your breath, little flame.” This is *my* way of being affectionate. This is as much as I can give her. Taunting her. Talking to her. “We’re together in this. The four of us. I’m not, nor will I ever be jealous. And you will always be owned by us. All three of us. Nothing you can do to fight it.”

Rome and Damien are my chosen family. They didn’t leave my bedside while I healed at the hospital. Didn’t cringe when the doctors removed the bandages. My friends were there, supporting me.

The skin on my cheek heats. Remembering those days hurts. It ruins this perfect moment. This perfect view of silk tying Quinlan’s perfect body to the bed.

Where she’ll be waiting for me until I’m back home.

“Fuck you,” she spits, eyes aimed at a spot behind the screen. At Rome. “You have no right to do this to me.”

“Yes, we do,” Rome deadpans.

“You’re here for a reason.” Damien’s words are harsh, though he’s smirking. “Or have you forgotten what you said to us?”

“You’re insane.”

“Liam.” He ignores her, turning to the camera. To me. “She thinks that after we’re done with Rex, she’s getting out of here. Said another, nicer man will have her.”

“Never going to happen.” My answer is clipped, each word coming off like a flick of a Zippo. A snap. “There will be no one else.”

“Liam, please.” Her eyes aren’t watery. They’re furious. “I’ll stay.”

“I’ll consider it. Now.” Softer voice. She deserves it, even if she’s entertaining the idea of us ever being over. “What about the goodnight you owe me?”

“I’m bound to the fucking bed.” The bed frame doesn’t budge, despite Quinlan’s best efforts to rattle it. “This is all the goodnight you’re going to

get.”

My heart squeezes at the sadness seeping into her voice. The corners of her eyes crinkle. She’s torn, scared of what we might do to her. Doesn’t trust us enough to know we won’t throw her like yesterday’s trash in a few weeks.

“She’s tired.” My eyebrows lower on my forehead. “That goodnight is enough for me. Let her sleep.”

“You’re not coming?”

“Later.”

“Bedtime, little captive.” Damien pulls the covers over her.

“Any last words before we turn the lights out?” Rome sits next to Damien, his large palm resting possessively on her cheek.

Quinlan’s gray gaze switches into that of reverence in an instant. She leans into him, same as she had with Damien.

“I hate you.” Quinlan’s whisper suggests she doesn’t hate us at all.

“Tell you what, Q.” The command in my voice has her blinking, focusing back on me. “I’ll be home sooner than I planned. I’ll come check on you.”

Creases appear on her smooth forehead. “Check on me?”

“Check whether you’re still hellbent on leaving us.” At the underlying threat I issue, Quinlan’s bottom lip juts out. She’s too wiped out to be angry. Too wrapped up in my friends’ touches to fight. “You could be, and that’ll be okay. In that case, I’ll leave the ropes on. Play with you. Or you could think it through. Decide you’re better off with us. Then you’ll be free of the binds.”

Quinlan opens her mouth to talk back. Her accusations are right there, on the tip of her tongue.

She’ll say I’m being cruel and unreasonable. She’ll tell me that having three men blackmail her into being their captive wasn’t and will never be her idea of a happily ever after.

She’ll be lying to herself and us.

I watched her last night while we took turns on her. While we unraveled her for us. Every mimic, every gesture.

She wants us. Her heart knows it. Her pussy does.

It’s her head that hasn’t caught up.

Yet.

“Quiet,” Rome warns. “Liam said to think about it, and that’s what you’re going to do.”

“Fuck y—”

He’s not having it, refusing to let her argue. Two of his fingers push into her mouth and she bites him.

“Careful, sweetheart. Your teeth…” he groans, shoving deeper, getting off on the pain. “Or maybe you’re asking me to fuck your pussy? Or is it Damien’s cock you’re begging for?”

“No, she’s just being a brat.” Damien strokes her hair, his mouth pressed to her temple. “Why don’t you just give in? Aren’t you tired? Don’t you want to sleep?”

She shivers, and ever-so-slowly, her lips close. She’s sucking on Rome’s fingers. Using him to pacify herself.

“Good girl.” Rome’s fingers disappear in her mouth, and he stills. He lets her suck them. Lets her relax. “That’s it. You’re so good. Suck my fingers. Make yourself feel good.”

She’s doing exactly that. Letting go.

Her emotions have been locked behind a mask for years. For Rex’s benefit. For her parents. Her clients.

No one’s ever given her the space to just be herself. It’s a lot. I get it.

That’s why we’re here. We’re obsessed with her smiles, her sadness, her fight. We’re after all of it.

We’re getting all of it.

She’ll learn to give it to us. To stop this *another man* nonsense.

With us, Quinlan will kick and scream and curse. She’ll draw blood. Be as feral as she’d like.

The three of us will be there no matter what. She has no idea how badly we need her to be just that. Herself.

“You can scream, little flame. Would you like that?” She hears the smile in my voice. And what’s that I see? A smile in return? A small one, but it’s there. A smile around Rome’s fingers. “Hate us, that’s okay too. We’ll have you either way. We’ll take care of you, always. There will be no other man after us. There will be no *after us*, period.”

Quinlan bobs her head, her eyes droopy.

I mean to say a lot more.

We’ll cherish you until there’s no more air in our lungs. Worship you until our hearts stop beating.

We will spend forever loving you.

Rome saves me from turning into an emotional mess.

They’re coddling her enough for a woman who’s been punished.

She’ll thank us by the time we’re done. When there are no more secrets between us.

He pulls out his fingers. My dick strains in my pants at the sight of the thin strip of saliva stretching from his fingertips to her lips.

I’ll taste it soon. Real fucking soon.

“Darling.” Damien’s voice is strained. “Be a good girl and tell Liam goodnight. Then we’ll let you sleep.”

She hums. “Good night, Liam.”

She means it. Fuck, she does. We made her better.

My scar burns, but this isn’t pain I’m feeling. It’s the ghost of her touch. Her searching fingers on my mangled skin.

“Good night, little flame.”

I’m too raw, too emotional to stay on the line a second longer.

I end the call, start the car and head watch over Rex until he closes. Then I’ll head home. I’ll go to her.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Damien

CALLING IT A NIGHT. That's what's expected of me. By Rome. By Quinlan.

We fucked her. Made her come. Bound her.

We added just enough humiliation to the mix that she blushed for us. Cursed us, then sought our affection.

Quinlan's cheek is warm beneath my touch. Her eyes are hooded. Lips beautifully swollen. Those between her legs, hidden by the covers, are equally swollen.

She'll stay here by herself, waiting for Liam. He'll be here later, after she's had time to think about the comment she made. About us. About the finality of her situation.

She wants answers. Wants to know what happened to me. What will happen to her once we're done with Rex.

Telling us there'll be another man wasn't meant to be a threat. She didn't say it to get under our skin. She was fishing. Testing us. Seeing whether we could be trusted.

We're the most trustworthy motherfuckers she's ever met.

Every punishment, every smack to her sweet, round ass and every bite mark. Nothing screams ownership more than that. She doesn't see it yet. She will.

Liam was right. She needs to rest. To recover.

So why am I still here? It defeats that purpose, to have me by her side, trailing my thumb along her cheek.

The guilt that's too big for my chest, that'll definitely ruin everything.

Tying her up isn't why my throat closes up. Why my lust and playfulness have simmered.

It's her. It's Rex. It's the report from our investigators and how I got it all wrong. He doesn't love her. He used her.

And I let it go on for as long as it did. I saw what I wanted to see, mistaken his overprotectiveness for something else.

In doing so, I failed. Failed to look closer. Failed to protect her.

The guilt has been eating at me for hours. I couldn't face her by myself. Had to calm the fuck down in my room. Then Rome brought her to me.

But now that my dick isn't hard and I can think, I feel it again, the weight of it crushing my chest.

"Damien," she mumbles, sinking further into the sheets.

Liam will be here soon. He hasn't played with her tonight. It's only fair that he'll have her for himself. We're not taking turns or keeping tabs, that's not the issue. This is about her. Quinlan should get to know the three of us.

Fall for the three of us.

We're going to make it work, have this fucked-up-ever-after. The three of us. And that can't happen if she has a favorite.

Yeah, she can pretend to hate Rome and me all she likes. Quinlan had fun today. We'll be her favorites if we're not careful.

I should leave her.

"She's falling asleep," Rome states, his wet fingers smearing our girl's saliva on her lips.

Neither of us moves to get up.

"Damien." A warning from Rome.

"Hmmm," reaches my ears. Quinlan.

My eyes focus and I notice her brow is scrunched. She's in pain. My fingers slid low while I was deep in thought, denting the soft skin of her cheek.

I'm directing my frustration at the wrong person.

"Sorry." I flex my fingers and angle Quinlan's head to me. "Rome's right. You are sleepy."

"Untie me." She's angry. She's also seeking my touch.

“Request denied.” One corner of my mouth ticks up. “Liam will be here later. That’s for him to decide.”

“Asshole.”

“You don’t sound too convincing when you’re smiling, darling.”

“Am not.” Her attempt at a frown is adorable.

I am so fucked.

This goes beyond obsession.

This woman in our home isn’t just beautiful. I don’t love her like I used to love the kid she was, that’s for damn sure.

Quinlan’s not a pawn, either.

Her holes are hot, and I could fill them every waking moment for the rest of my life. I want to stay in her heart most of all.

She’s such a good girl. Giving herself to us. Moaning when I bite and torture her.

Everything isn’t the right word for her.

There isn’t a correct phrase to attach to my feelings.

Not one word says *I’m desperate to crawl under your skin, infiltrate your brain and take up all the available space there. Poison your blood and carve my name into your bones.*

“I’ll give you two some privacy.” Rome knows me better than I know myself. It’s no surprise that he gets up and leaves.

The door closes behind him. We’re alone here, Quinlan, me and the soft glow from the lamp on her bedside table.

This is sick, to get off on this. To fall harder for her when she’s all tied up. Our little captive. It doesn’t matter. I love it. The sight of her like this takes my goddamn breath away.

“Did he leave so you could have fun by yourself?” For all her exhaustion, Quinlan still manages a scowl. “Hurt me some more by yourself?”

“No.” I slide my thumb onto the space between her eyebrows, massaging the frown lines.

The creases in her forehead smooth. She sighs, her eyelashes fluttering. “Then why? What do you want?”

“Full of questions, aren’t you, darling?”

“And you’re full of answers,” she bites back.

Quinlan fights her heavy eyelids, reminding me of a younger version of myself. When I was between the ages ten and eleven, staying up for as long

as I could. Keeping Rex from grabbing one of my foster siblings while I was out.

"Damien?"

"I needed alone time with you." I figure I can give her that. She won't pity me for liking her.

Like. What a fucking joke. What an insult.

"To do what, exactly?"

"Whatever the fuck I want."

"That isn't an ans—" When I press a finger to her mouth, she opens it, trying to bite me.

"Now, now." I pull my feet up on the bed, settling between Quinlan's spread legs. My grip is firm on her jaw, my face inches from hers. "Is that a way to treat your captor?"

"Fuck you."

I can't get enough of her attitude. Fucking addicted.

A compliant student. A dutiful daughter. The half-sister Rex could count on to do everything his lazy ass hasn't. A business owner who landed raving reviews and five-star ratings.

This isn't the woman sprawled out beneath me.

This one is my woman. Beautiful in every way.

"I could." I shove her face to the side, licking her cheek. Getting off on her shivers. "Fuck you again, since that's what you're asking for. There'll never be a moment I'm not hard for you, Quinlan."

"How can you be sure?" My teeth graze her earlobe, and her tremor is a shot of adrenaline to my veins.

She was testing us. She is unsure. I'll choke the life out of her doubts. She won't have any of those, soon.

"Oh, I'm sure." I trail soft, deceiving kisses along her neck.

When she hums for me, I bite her.

Quinlan's teeth dig into her lip, silencing the screams that vibrate in her throat.

"You've only been stalking me for what, five years, right?" she asks.

My answer is my tongue flattening on the area where I bit her.

"Five years, then." Quinlan accepts my silence as a yes. "That doesn't mean you know me. Doesn't mean you'll want to keep me. You could get bored with me. And what happens if I like you and…"

Her voice trails. I'm holding still, uncharacteristically silent.

The rest of the sentence is, if she likes us and we decide she's not for us after all. What if the real her isn't someone we'd burn down cities for.

"Five years, that's all," she repeats. She's trying her best to make sense of my silence. Of the scattered puzzle pieces. Looking hard, searching for the missing ones. "You couldn't have known me before that. You were young. No eleven-year-old would follow a baby around."

Almost no eleven-year-old.

An adoring one, a grateful one, he would.

Without my fucking permission, memories barrel into me.

A fist throwing me into the wall. A knife glinting under cheap fluorescent lights. Mean, brown eyes. Harlow, his now-dead-wife, leaning against the doorframe, her arms folded over her chest, her auburn eyebrow cocked.

"What are you waiting for, Rex? Fucking do it already. Dinner's getting cold."

That's fine, though. Jagger and Laurel are safe for the night. Nothing else matters.

"Nothing else," I whisper against Quinlan's skin.

"What?" Quinlan's voice. A light at the end of a long tunnel. A beacon in a starless night.

My savior.

She won't be the woman pitying me.

"Nothing."

I'm on my forearms, bracketing Quinlan's face and cursing under my breath. I should've listened to my own damn self earlier. Should've walked out of here when Rome had.

Except this *pull*. This fucking *pull*.

"What did he do?" More softness. The lamp on the bedside table has nothing to do with it, though. This time, it's all Quinlan. She believes me. "What did Rex do to you?"

She's trying to turn the tables. Be the one who crawls under my skin. Infiltrates my brain. Poisoning my blood.

I could tell her it's a waste of time.

The day she was born was the day I became hers. My love for her was innocent and now…

Fuck. Now I'm all hers.

But there are layers to place one on top of the others. A pace to stick to.

"I'll tell you." The hope in her eyes is short-lived when I add, "One day."

The answer I offer does more than disappoint Quinlan. It upsets her. She fights the restraints, moving her body in the process. Grinding herself on my very hard cock.

My fingers curl around the side of her neck.

“You’re looking for answers?” I push back, my erection pinning her to the bed. “Or getting fucked? Making you nice and wet for Liam?”

“He did something, didn’t he?” Quinlan purses her lips, unfazed. Determined. “Something terrible. Did he touch you?”

Pity. The emotion I’ve been hoping to avoid. Fucking great.

“I wasn’t molested or sodomized. Rex and Harlow weren’t into that.”

“Okay.” The relief on her face is miniscule. Her pout doesn’t let up. Curiosity remains firm in her gray eyes. “Still. You’re being cruel to me to get back at Rex. What did he do? How bad was it? You have to tell me. You have to trust me. I hate it. I hate all of it.”

“Me?” I raise my eyebrows, feigning shock. “Cruel to you?”

Storm clouds gather behind her gaze. Crimson red taints her cheeks.

“Are you being serious right now?” Quinlan tugs on her restraints for emphasis. “And you’re evading. I’m tied up. I have nowhere to run. I won’t go to him, not for anything. Why won’t you tell me?”

“Giving you what you want isn’t being cruel.” I keep deflecting, rolling my hips, pushing my hardness into her softest, warmest place.

Quinlan groans. I smirk.

“See?”

“I see that I’m a captive. That you’re not being honest.”

“Here’s what I see.” She lets out another groan when I pull back, and I chuckle.

I shake my head, my disapproving glare pinning Quinlan back in place. I didn’t stay here to fuck her by myself. I’m here to soak her up. To shed some of the guilt. To be there for her.

Have those late-night talks I’ve been dreaming of. Her nearness that I’ve been craving.

Being together, like this, is a million times better than the lousy photos our investigators have forwarded us. There’s no comparing Quinlan’s scent to the live feed of her showering at home.

When she was far from me.

So far.

“Damien?”

“Well...” Her curiosity has my smirk stretching. “I see you. A woman who had three men take her virginity last night. A woman who loved it.”

Red. She’s beet red everywhere my eyes land on. Her cheeks. The curve of her neck. Her collarbone. The sweet shade reaches as far as up her arms.

“They fucked her hard. Hurt her. Took turns making her feel good.” I lower my face so our foreheads touch. “This woman was stretched. She moaned and sobbed. Orgasmed so beautifully on their fingers. On their cocks.”

It hurts, how hard I am. I’m turned on all fucking over. Wanting Quinlan is a part of my DNA. My heart beats for her. Every muscle, tendon, and cell in my body is hers.

I should be harsher. Colder. Either eat her out or fuck her to lower the intensity of these damn feelings.

I should leave after that, come back colder and more collected tomorrow. Otherwise, I’ll talk.

And that pity. I can’t have that.

She needs to know the real me first. The man I’ve become. She’ll never pity him.

“I…” She sucks in a breath, flustered at my crude words.

“She had the warmest, tightest cunt.” I nuzzle my nose to hers. “Sucked every drop of their cum in. Let them fill her with it. Maybe, maybe she has babies inside her. And she was beautiful and brave while she took them. While she cried for them. While she accepted them. You’re one of a kind. That’s what I see, darling.”

She blinks, her eyelashes fluttering. Her throat bobs. Her pupils are giant.

The pleasure of making her as hungry as I am is indescribable.

This woman has always been mine to bend.

“Rex isn’t the only one, is he?” And she’s curious. Fuck, she’s too curious. She’ll coax me into spilling more than I intended to say. “You, the three of you, haven’t held back on this revenge for twenty-three years just to hurt Rex.”

A switch flips inside my head. Quinlan’s sneaky. Fucking clever, taking more than I’m willing to give. Not to mention these secrets aren’t mine to offer to her.

“This conversation has been lovely.” In one swift movement, I slide off her. The covers twist in my palm and I lift them to her lips. Stuff her mouth with the ball of fabric. A makeshift gag. “Back to your punishment we go.”

Quinlan spits it out—of course she would—and glowers at me. “What the fuck?”

“Shh.” I grab a fistful of the covers again. “It’s for your own good. You’ll thank me for it.”

“Don’t shush me,” she grits behind clenched teeth. “Why did you gag me? Are you insane? We were having a—”

“Wrong. You were asking questions. Trying to manipulate me. This isn’t how this works.”

My fingers pinch her nose shut. Poor Quinlan has no choice other than to open her mouth for air. Her eyebrows knit. Arms and legs kicking against her restraints.

“Asshole, stop!”

“Too late.” I shove the covers back where they belong. In Quinlan’s mouth, with my palm splayed on top of it. “What’s done is done. This is a punishment, not a conversation. You’re keeping the gag until you fall asleep.”

Her furious eyes clash into mine, and fuck. I’m sick for loving this. For watching her helpless and out of her mind with anger.

It’s better like that for her as well. She has to see what a psycho I’ve turned into. She should know what and who she’s dealing with.

I can already tell she likes it. Her nipples are pulled tight beneath the covers. Heat seeps through her body to mine.

“Beautiful.” I kiss Quinlan’s temple. My obsession. My love. My everything. “Think about the things you said. Rest with the gag in your mouth. Liam will be here soon. If you’re good, he’ll be more merciful than I am. If not…”

I let the sentence hang in the air. Hold the gag to her mouth.

She glares and screams through the fabric and my palm for as long as she can. With everything she has in her. I’m there, withholding kisses or affection. I’m just fucking there, waiting her out.

Her body slumps eventually. Eyes fluttering shut.

She’s passed out.

I kiss her nose one last time. “Good night, darling.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Damien

ROME LEANS AGAINST THE doorway to his room, one ankle crossed on top of the other. “I heard her scream.”

“I watched her scream.” I shrug, shoving my hands into my pockets. “So?”

“You’re a bastard.” My friend presses his lips together, suppressing a laugh. “What did you do to her?”

“Made sure she was gagged for Liam. She’s beautiful like that.”

“You talked to her.” He sees past my bullshit. “Was it what you imagined?”

“Yeah. It was…everything.” No better answer comes to mind. There is no other answer. “Why are you out here, anyway? Worried I might kill her?”

“Pretty sure you’d kill me before you even think about killing Quinlan.”

“I’ll kill everyone other than her, you, or Liam.” *Unless you harm her. Then you’re dead.*

He jerks his head toward the inside of his room, to where Quinlan won’t hear us if she wakes up. He closes the door behind us, leveling me with his dark gaze.

“Langford Marketing.” His father’s national marketing company. Rome examines the fresh wounds on his right-hand knuckles. Looks up at me. “It’s going down in three days.”

“Before the financial reports are released.” I cock my eyebrow, wondering why this is news. “Everything’s going according to plan. Right?”

“It is. Harmony will get on the flight to Paris tomorrow morning. Everything’s set in her safe home there,” Rome continues, referring to the head of accounting at Langford Marketing. Our snitch. “With the new passport, new identity. It’s taken care of.”

Again, more of what we’ve already discussed this week. I try to ignore the nagging concern about the dark look in his eyes. Instead, I treat it like any other strategy meeting we’ve had before.

“Jagger delivered her new papers last week, for her and her family.” This, too, is a repeat of our plans. I do it anyway. For some reason, he needs this. I’ll never turn my back on him. “Laurel is ready for her new employee. Everything’s taken care of.”

“Right.” Rome nods. Runs his hand across his scruff. Over his buzz cut. “So, in three days, Joseph Langford’s reputation will be smeared across the news. The tax evasions. Fake invoices. The falsified reports. He’ll be humiliated by the time we get to their home.”

Harmony took some coaxing, but eventually she delivered the papers to incriminate Rome’s father. The priceless information we’re absolutely *never* handing over to the police.

Joseph Langford has connections in high places. They’ve gotten him out of a lot of shit, including the starvation of his children. Rome and Anne hadn’t shown up to any galas or charity events over the years. No one questioned why they weren’t there. Their doctors never voiced any concerns about their weight or their developmental delays.

There’ll be no ignoring or burying this article that’ll be broadcasted on national television.

The entire country will witness it. Then we’ll strike.

“Mack said he’s right on schedule.” Rome’s scowl deepens as he talks about the reporter. “The expose is set to be released—”

“In three days. Yes.” Okay, now I’m officially concerned. “Want to tell me what’s going on? You got so high on Quinlan’s pussy that you’re worried you’re forgetting the plan?”

Fuck my mouth. Fuck me for not knowing another way to handle this.

“Jesus, no.” He’s serious. Something’s gotten to him while I was in Quinlan’s room.

So am I. “Then?”

“After that.” After his parents are publicly humiliated. Denounced. Cut out from society in a matter of seconds.

They deserve that. It won’t make up for years of Joseph starving him and Anne. Won’t change the fact that Elaine chose to look away while her children cried or were locked up in their rooms. When, on occasion, they were forced to throw up their food.

Even killing them won’t suffice. It’s all we have.

“*After that* what, Rome?” This isn’t like him. Stalling. “If you’re trying to freak me out, it’s working.”

“Before that, even. Before I kill them. Fuck.” His eyes slam shut, and he shakes his head. When he looks at me, he’s tormented. Not scared. Not Rome. But it’s cutting close. “Quinlan. How am I going to tell her that I have my own revenge plan? That in three days, I’ll be a murderer?”

“You…” I study my friend’s face. I see my fear reflecting in them. “You hate the thought she’ll find out about the pain. About how deep it went.”

“I hate the idea of pity.” He lets out a low breath. “I thought about it, you know. Lie to her. Say I’m going to murder them because I’m in the fucking mood to carve a man’s heart out. That I’ve been curious about how it’d feel to have my hand squeezing around Elaine’s intestines.”

“It’s as valid a fantasy as any.” At that, Rome frowns. I shrug. Smile. “What?”

“She won’t like it. A person like Quinlan—someone who’s dedicated her life to her parents—would hate it.”

“And?” Since *I* don’t want to tell her, I start considering the same idea. My smile widens. “It’s not like she’s leaving here, so why the fuck—”

“Damien, enough.” His hand slices the air. “For one fucking second.”

“Fine.” For a few seconds, I consider a solution for his problem. Ah, there it is. “Bring your sister over for emotional support.” Quinlan won’t be able to pity him when Anne’s here, smiling and giggling. A proof that the two Langford siblings have more than survived their parents. They thrived. Maybe I’ll use the opportunity to tell her my story too. Who knows. “When you tell Quinlan about your parents, have Anne here.”

“That’s a cowardly move.”

“She’ll be here anyway, and—”

“I told her not to,” Rome grunts, folding his arms over his chest. “She won’t listen. She demanded to be a part of this. And she demanded to meet

Quinlan.”

“See? It’ll be fun. Anne will make everything less morbid. She always does.”

“That’s true. We’ll see.” A weight seems to have been lifted off his shoulders. Mine too. “Is that what you did in Quinlan’s bedroom? Went into detail about what Rex did to you? Why you’re doing this?”

“Fuck no.” I’m about to say, *I’ll never tell her*, except that’s a lie. There’s no running from it, even if she’s never leaving. “She asked if I was molested, I said no. Then she asked what happened and I gagged her. No big deal. I’ll tell her later.”

“You don’t want her pitying on you, either.” He doesn’t care that I gagged her. Probably because we both know she likes it.

“No. Maybe…”

“Maybe what?”

I smile. “After I tell her, I can fuck the pity out of her.”

“Yeah.” Rome’s eyebrows pinch. His eyes darken. “Better than her thinking we’re out there, just looking to kill people.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, then.” Rome comes closer. In a very rare show of affection, he places a hand on my shoulder. “Good night, Dame.”

I’ll never be able to sleep with her bound and beautiful in the next room. I tell him anyway, “Night, Rome.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Liam

SILENCE.

No fingers tapping on keyboards. No rustling of papers. No hushed voices or heated conversations.

No soft *whoosh* of fridge doors being opened and closed. Nothing sizzles on the stove.

No moaning or sobbing or accusations.

Everyone's asleep. Tucked in their rooms.

Good.

The things I have to tell Damien will have to wait for tomorrow. He'll be glad to hear Rex is growing madder by the second. Her half-brother read Quinlan's email to her parents on his way home, and he was pissed. Shouted "Fuck!" in the empty street.

I read it too. I have it memorized.

Hi, Mom,

How are you? How's Dad?

I'll be gone for a while, but please don't worry about me. I'm doing great!

This place I'm in is really nice. The people are nice.

Your doctors have Rex's number, so they'll talk to him. Email me if you need anything, please, Mom.

Love you. Please don't worry about me.

P.S. I would've called, but I dropped my phone in the toilet. Oops!

Happiness dripped from her words. Whether she did it to calm her parents or she actually likes it here, it doesn't matter. We counted on that, and without ever knowing it, Quinlan delivered.

Tomorrow.

I have a captive waiting for me.

The first floor is dark as I cross it. City lights filter through the floor-to-ceiling windows, offering very little light. I undo the buttons of my suit jacket on my way up. I'm quiet, stealthy as I climb the stairs.

I'm desperate for a shower. Wash the day off me. The hate that pollutes my soul. Any reminder of the people who hurt us, and by us, I mean Quinlan too. I want it off.

I want to go to her when her half-brother isn't on my mind. When I don't have the urge to slaughter someone.

She's owed that. She deserves the best version of me. I might not be what other people would call nice or affectionate.

Whatever I am, though, it's good for her. *We're* good for her.

Quinlan…

Naked. Bound. Helpless.

Jesus.

Fuck taking a shower. Fuck clearing my head. My hand curls around the Zippo in my pocket as I eliminate the distance to her bedroom. I'm carried by a dark, innate need to be with her.

There's no stopping this.

No holding back the rage that rises with every step.

Rex had been manipulating Quinlan for years. He's the one to blame for her being a captive. For her thinking that this is the only way to help her parents.

Had he been a decent human being, she could've counted on him. Could've told us to go fuck ourselves.

My hand presses on the handle of her door, and I don't wait. I slip inside the dark room. Damien and Rome switched the lights off, including the lamp at her bedside.

But light seeps in through the open door.

I pinch my eyes shut, don't dare look at her when I'm like this. A ball of rage.

Squeezing the Zippo takes down the edge. The pain. The need for retribution. The desire to crush Rex's windpipe. I breathe through it all.

I'm back in the room. Here with her, and no one else.

Only her.

When I open my eyes, I'm at the door again, closing it. My Zippo isn't as heavy in my pocket anymore. It's featherlight, calling to me.

Flick. My thumb strokes the flint and there it is, light.

There she is. Illuminated by my flame, I can see Quinlan lying on her bed.

Arms stretched over her head, legs spread. Bound. Her hair is wild around her face. Her head is turned in my direction, eyes closed. Her tattoo is so beautiful. It's sad.

And she's been gagged. The bunched, soaked fabric next to her mouth is a clear sign that one of my friends stuffed it in her mouth after I hung up. They stayed there for a while, secured it in her mouth. Waited for her to fall asleep.

Kinky.

Fucking love that.

I take another step toward her.

Her breaths are shallow, eyelashes resting on her soft cheeks.

Before I climb on the bed, my eyes sweep across the room.

Nothing seems out of place. Other than the bashed television, everything's exactly where it should be. Her laptop's on the desk. Her clothes aren't scattered on the floor. No plates or glasses are smashed on the floor, walls or windows.

There aren't any clawing marks on the walls.

Of course she hasn't. She wouldn't need to. She's not locked inside her room. She could walk around the house at any moment.

Quinlan hasn't tried to escape. She liked what we did to her yesterday.

She likes it here.

I. Haven't. Locked. Her. In. Here.

The reassurance is a balm to my nerves.

Quinlan's been comfortable here. Sort of. And this is just the beginning.

My lungs expand. Relief washes over me.

A momentary relief.

Lust is quick to drown out every other emotion. My head pounds. My cock thickens.

I hover at the edge of the bed where Damien and Rome were a little over an hour ago. I'm ensnared by Quinlan's calm expression. Every feature on her beautiful face.

Her parted lips are an invitation. I imagine stretching them with my cock, but don't touch her. Not yet.

I observe. Eyes on the curve of her neck. The mounds of her breasts and the valley leading to her navel. Hidden or not, she's gorgeous.

Her taste on my tongue. I can't get it out of my head. Memories of her sweetness return to me as if I have my mouth on hers right this fucking minute. As if I've never stopped kissing her.

I'm going to. I'm going to kiss her mouth, her collarbone.

Her clit.

Snap and the Zippo goes to her bedside table. The room bathes in darkness.

It has no place here. I don't need it to ease away the panic. To bury the memories in the back of my head. Quinlan silences my demons.

My eyes adjust to the soft light coming from the moon.

Our woman.

She tugs at my heartstrings, my little flame. The only fire I allow anywhere near me, anywhere close enough to graze my skin.

Jacket, shoes, and socks, they all go to a heap on the floor.

I'll kiss Quinlan between her legs. Lick her until she admits there'll be no one else. No other man. Not in her dreams and not in her waking hours. I'll force her to promise anything and everything with my fingers deep in her pussy, curled to stroke *that* spot.

Demand she give in to us.

It would make me so pleased, I'll tell her. *So fucking pleased to have you. To own you.*

The sleeves of my shirt. They'll make it hard to move around and touch Quinlan the way I need. I roll them up my forearms, up to my elbows. Run my hand through my hair. Of course it bounces back down my forehead. Of course.

The slightest smile curves my lips up. Quinlan likes it. She likes all of us.

She can fight us day and night. Doesn't matter. She's ours.

No more waiting. Done with watching. I'm ready with my fingers hooked to the top of the covers. I'm careful not to brush them on Quinlan's skin. Not to wake her.

Only when I’m down there, kissing her, licking her, does she get to wake up. When she’s already needy, willing to agree to anything for me.

Our Quinlan would do that. She’d be such a good girl. She’ll come apart for me. Will come on my mouth. Will tell me she’ll stay.

“Help.”

I blink. Once. Twice. My dirty thoughts are gone as I stare down at her face. At her *sleeping* face.

Help.

Did she really say that? Or was it my imagination?

Tension settles in my bones. It’s uncomfortable, how I’m sent back in time. I wish I could reach out and grab my Zippo. Wish I could shed some light, flick it open a shut. Just until the panic settles.

Quinlan’s presence can’t comfort me when she’s in pain. When she’s like this, brow furrowed, eyes pinched, I’m anything but calm.

My fingers freeze on the covers. My free hand, the one I lean on, remains at my side. I could use it. Could grab the Zippo.

Except I can’t.

Help.

It might as well be on another planet. Panic rises in my chest, and I’m alone. With her and yet so fucking alone.

Minutes pass. They stretch out for an eternity as I wait, listening for anything that might come out of Quinlan’s mouth. A sign that I wasn’t imagining it. That this tightness in my throat isn’t for nothing.

What I get is silence.

I slam my eyes shut. Listen to the *flick* and *snap* sounds in my head over and over until air pushes itself into my lungs.

When I open them, Quinlan’s lips are parted. She’s quiet, though. She doesn’t scream for help. There’s no way she feels caged in our penthouse. No way it haunts her in her dreams.

An hour. She couldn’t have been here longer than that. She had to have fallen asleep not too long after I ended the call.

Whoever gagged her—probably Damien—loved her. Teased her. Caressed and kissed her.

It was all part of a game.

Had to be.

“Help.” The pleading is urgent. “Help, please.”

Red, hot flames lick at my chest, curling up my neck. They're a searing touch on my scar. A gasoline doused my psyche, about to catch fire.

It'll destroy me.

Quinlan's breaths quicken, or maybe it's mine.

Quinlan's mouth twists in horror. Her lips part wider.

I know what comes next. I fucking know.

"Help us!" Her scream is an explosion. It's fire closing in on me. I'm hot everywhere. Burning up. "Mommy, where are you? Daddy! Help him! Help Blake, I can't reach him!"

Her baby brother.

This isn't about you, my subconscious urges. Tears streak her cheeks, and she isn't crying for me. I'm not the one who's hurting. Her brother is. In her nightmare, he's drowning all over again.

I understand.

But then there's my trauma. The flames are still hot in the closet. My own cries for help blend into hers.

Cries that were left unanswered.

"Please." She sobs in her sleep, her body breaking in tremors. Wrists and ankles tugging on the restraints. Her head thrashes left and right. "Blake. Help Blake. Please, please, please. I can't… I don't… Mommy"—*heart wrenching sob*—"please, where *are* you?"

I have to help her. Have to wake her up and yank her back into safety.

She was only five when he died. The police reports said he slipped on the edge of the pool. Crawled on it and fell. He was so small. His lungs filled up fast. Even Quinlan's dad, who was a lifeguard, couldn't get to him on time, and he jumped in right after him.

Quinlan's cries make it sound like it didn't go down that way.

I would be mad, but nothing really registers, not to its fullest. I'm in hell myself. In the closet. Flames lick my skin. My mother's dresses burning down at my side. I can't get out of here. Can't.

"Blake. No." The words are howls. The O stretches on forever, tearing me apart. Punching at my lungs that's stopped working a minute ago. "No, no, *no*."

The physical pain intensifies. Quinlan's voice sounds less and less like hers. Like the twenty-three-year-old version of her, anyway.

She sounds like a kid.

I was a kid once.

Panic. That’s all I feel. A prisoner in my own body.

My head is fucking with me, damn it. It’s fucking with me and I have to help her.

I have to—

I’m not alone in the closet. Quinlan’s locked inside with me, and we’re both burning.

Because of me. Because I couldn’t stand another moment of the darkness. Of being so helpless. So alone.

My parents would cry when they find our burned corpses. They’ll weep and scream and mourn. Mine and Quinlan’s.

Because of me.

It’ll be my fault.

I should’ve never let Aria lock you in here with me, Quinlan. I’m so sorry. So sorry. So. Fucking. Sorry.

Quinlan’s sobbing on the bed, and I’m to blame for it too. My precious little flame.

My fault. My fault. My fault.

A sliver of light reaches from the door. I don’t have to look over there to see a shadow hovering. Maybe two. I don’t know.

I don’t—

“Help us,” she screams. Her arms strain.

Her chest heaves.

I’ve had enough.

Whoever’s outside in the hall trusts me to help her.

A blink, and I’m back in Quinlan’s bedroom. My fingers are hooked around the covers. The walls aren’t closing in on us. My Zippo is on the bedside table. I didn’t use it. Didn’t burn anything down.

“Quinlan.” The moment I say it, I’m vaguely aware of the door shutting. The light’s out.

I can take care of her. I. Will.

The bed dips with my weight, and I inhale Quinlan’s scent. She smells of sex and of *her* and it alleviates the pressure around my lungs. There’s no smoke in the room. None.

“I couldn’t catch him. He fell.”

I’m there, between her legs. My hands are on her cheeks. Firm, but not too firm. It’ll make things worse, startling her into waking up.

“I’m so sorry.” Her apology sounds a lot like mine. Her face is all pain. She looks like she’s crumpling from the inside out. “I tried. I tried. I was stuck. I’m so sorry.”

“Quinlan.” My forehead presses to hers. I’m here. I’m saving her. That’s what it means to be mine. I’ll save her every fucking time. “Wake up, little flame. Wake up, beautiful.”

“Oh *no*.”

I do the only thing I have left in my arsenal. I dip my mouth to hers, finding her lips.

This isn’t a kiss. It’s my lips on hers. It’s my soul calling for Quinlan out of the depths. Out of that pool. Out of that horrible night.

“Little flame,” I whisper. No, I demand. I imagine my voice is my hand, and I outstretch it to her. Dig into her dream and pull her the fuck out. “Come back. I’m not asking you again.”

Part-gasp, part-scream, and then—thank fuck, gray eyes flash in the dark.

“Liam.”

Impossible. It’s impossible to describe this feeling in my chest, to have her recognize me. She was a million miles away, trapped in her dream, and here she is. Seeing me in the dark.

“I’m here, little flame,” I repeat the name so she can hear it. I’m doing what I haven’t done before with anyone other than Rome or Damien. I crack my soul wide open for her to lean into. “With you. In your room. In your new home.”

“What happened?” Quinlan’s focused on me one moment, the next she’s trying to pull her arms close to her body. The relief in her eyes disappears the longer she tugs on her restraints. “You tied me up. You tied me up. You tied me up. Let me go. Please, let me go.”

Let me go.

The fire returns as if it’s never been extinguished in the first place. Thick smoke curls around me.

Let me go.

She’s right. She’s absolutely right.

We tied her up.

Let me go, Aria.

She never did, didn’t she?

Fuck. Fuck.

Without my Zippo in my palm, there's no telling how long I've got. The panic will win over. I know it will.

Soon.

Calling Rome or Damien isn't an option. Quinlan said *my* name. She needs me and I'll die before I let her down.

I push through, just barely. I'm here again. My throat seizes and my muscles refuse to play along, but I'm done asking them for permission.

Bright gray eyes stare at me from under. Begging.

"Liam." A breath. Just a soft breath, and I'm propelled into action.

My hands release the ties around her wrists. My fingers massage her skin, my eyes searching for abrasions. From this close, I can see everything.

Over the video call, I got hard for her. That's all it took, a split second of watching her bound, spread and so incredibly sexy. I liked it. Couldn't get her out of my head.

Binding her was the right call. She needed the reassurances, to feel rather than hear that she was ours for life. She had to be punished for ever thinking it.

It was hot.

It's not hot at all now that my face is hovering over her sobbing ones and I have her wrist in my hand.

"Liam. Thank you."

I'm torn. Sliced right down the middle. The pulse raging beneath my fingertips isn't just hers anymore. It's mine.

"I'm sorry." My voice is rough, thick with the panic that I can hardly contain anymore.

Her eyes are wide as she sniffles. "What for?"

I kiss her, moving to stand at the foot of the bed. One ankle after the other. I have to release her before I crumble into dust.

But it's getting harder to keep moving. My eyes slam shut, my head bows down.

"Liam?" Quinlan's voice is as soft as her cheeks.

She brings me back. I stroke one freed ankle. Slide my fingers higher, brushing her calf. This isn't about me. I'll break down later. In my room. Where she can't see me like this.

"What for?" Our eyes meet, and my brow furrows. I don't mean to say what I'm about to say. It comes out of me anyway. "For getting lost inside my head when you needed me."

She’s quiet, and I take it as a cue. She won’t forgive me tonight. She shouldn’t. Tomorrow, she might. Tomorrow, I’ll be calmer. Be myself again. I always do.

I’ll touch Quinlan, kiss her, fuck her. That other man she talked about, he would’ve begged for her forgiveness. Demanded it.

Not me.

Nothing binds her to the bed anymore. I want to kiss her ankle. I’m devastated by how much I want to kiss it. How I know it’ll put out the fire in my head.

I can’t. I can’t even talk and tell her that I have to leave.

Now that Quinlan’s not bound anymore, my body collapses in on itself. I’m paralyzed all over again.

“Liam. Liam, come here,” she pleads. Quinlan should’ve told me to get lost, and instead she’s pleading. “Please.”

This *please* sounds different from before. This isn’t a *let me go*. This isn’t a *look at what they’ve done to me*. This isn’t even *I’m stuck in the dream where my brother drowns*.

This *please* is meant for me. Every bone in my body demands I listen to her, that I go to her. Same bones are as heavy and as frozen as my muscles.

“Hey, Liam.”

I look up at her. Climb the bed. Knees between her still spread legs.

“Maybe… Maybe you’ll feel better up here?” Quinlan closes her legs around me. She’s being gentle as she talks me off the ledge. “I didn’t mean to scream. I was scared. I want you here. Please, Liam.”

Get in the fucking closet, kid. I don’t have time for your shit today. My boyfriend’s coming over and you know how much he hates it when you’re in the way. Get. In. The. Fucking. Closet.

Never *please*. Always *get in*.

Sandy blonde hair instead of a light blonde one. Gray eyes instead of black.

I inhale Quinlan’s scent. That and the way she looks at me push me forward. I crawl up her body, whipping the covers off her. Watch her.

“Lie next to me,” she pleads, reaching her hand out to my arm. “We can be together here. The bed is big enough for the both of us, and I want you here. Don’t leave. Please, don’t leave.”

This *please*. This comfort.

There’s no denying her. I lie down. She’s pliant and soft, letting me pull her to her side so she’s facing me. Our hands reach, searching. Legs cross one on top of the other.

“Liam.”

Her fingers massage my scalp, running through my hair. It’s more than a sweet caress. It’s her, helping me to get out of the burning closet, dragging me away from danger. Her palm presses to my scar next, and that’s it.

Water. I feel them splashing on my burning face like the water in my parents’ shower.

Here, I don’t need to fumble for the valve. Here, Quinlan does it for me.

“Yes?” One word. That’s all I have for her.

“You were supposed to ask if I still wanted to leave before you untied me.”

Sweet Quinlan. Attempting to diffuse the situation with a smile and banter.

Her affection does something to me. Nudges in the right direction, distancing me from the fire.

“You…” Fuck, I hate that I’m choked up. She’s supposed to trust me. To be able to count on me. Clearing my throat comes out as a groan, and Quinlan flinches. Good. If I scare her, I can’t be this traumatized person. “You had a nightmare. You were terrified even when you woke up. We’re not monsters. We’re not—”

Them.

“We’re not.”

“No. I see it. I get it. And I know someone put you through hell. Not just Damien.” Her nose nuzzles mine when she shakes her head. “I’m here for you. You can talk to me, if that helps.”

Does she want me to talk about why we took her? Why I’m here, frozen and cold while my insides crumple? Burn into ashes?

“What do you mean?”

“Tell me what happened to you.” Quinlan talks faster than it would take me to slip open my Zippo’s lid.

Her palm on my cheek is so fucking distracting. So arousing. I’m hard when I shouldn’t be. I’m inhaling fresh air. Quinlan’s scent.

“Hey.” It’s when she says this word that I hear her. Really hear her. The lilt in her voice. The remnants of the nightmare are there. “Show me yours, I’ll show you mine?”

Our scars, she means. The ones on the inside.

“Why would you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Share anything with me.” My fingers are at her chin, squeezing, tipping it up. I want to believe what she says. Except too much shit has happened to me that I can’t do that. Besides—“You said you were leaving. Is this your way of telling me you won’t?”

She huffs, scowling. “Glad to see you’re all better. Feel free to leave now.”

But her hand is still on my cheek. And I’m a broken man.

“That came out wrong. I don’t…” I need this more than I realized. I still sound mad as hell. I hope to fuck my words make up for it. “Say you’ll stay.”

Her gray eyes study me. Whatever she finds there, it looks like it pleases her.

“Give me one good reason.” A smile teases her lips. A cautious one. She’ll give me hell if I keep acting like a prick, that much is obvious. “And I might.”

“If you think we’re sparing Rex…” My panic has gone up in smoke. I’m safe here. I’m never letting go. Even after we’ll kill Rex, even when she resents us for it, we’re keeping her. “Better think again, little flame. He’s a dead man, and you’re ours.”

There are eyes on us. The door’s closed, but I know better. I know of another door that leads in here. I know about the peephole in the bookshelf.

“No, I don’t think you’ll spare him. He… He doesn’t deserve it.” Resignation. That’s what I hear. And…sadness? Whatever Damien’s said to her, she believes him.

This isn’t just about what he did to Damien and his foster siblings. She realizes he’s not a bad man. Nothing about him is good, including the way he treated her.

“Show me I’m more than a fuck doll to you. That’s what I meant.” Her voice falters at the crude words. Our brave little one says them anyway. “Show me, and I won’t bite your dick off in your sleep.”

“Oh, you’d try that?” Stifling a laugh is fucking hard. It’s a miracle that I manage.

“You can count on it.”

I’m such a sucker for her lips that I kiss them. “Not like it’ll make a difference, but say you’ll stay. That no matter what you hear, you’ll stay. Because you want to.”

She can’t nod with my hand firm on her chin, so she blinks. “I’ll stay because I want to. I already do.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Quinlan

WHEN DAMIEN GAGGED ME until my body gave up on me, I was furious.

How dare he. I was on his side. I made it clear that I believed him. I love my family, but I won't condone abuse. Won't stand for violence. Against children, no less.

I wouldn't take Rex's side. Damien *saw* I wouldn't.

He gagged me anyway.

And I cared for him anyway. For the man I met on the street. For my psychotic kidnapper. For the wounded kid he was.

But anger wasn't all I felt. I was turned on. Hot everywhere. It was so demeaning, to be bound. To be silenced. The covers were stuffed in my mouth and I wanted him.

Now Liam is here. His panic bleeds all over the room. I see his pain. I imagine what Damien must've looked like at its worst, and that does it. I don't have it in me to be mad at them. At all.

These men pull me in every direction. Manipulate me. Treat me like I'm their sex doll.

That doesn't mean they're bad people. They're good. As insane as they are, they're good people.

Liam's skin is warm to the touch. In the dark of night, he's made of shadows and a pair of stunning amber eyes.

It shouldn’t be that difficult, to get them to trust me.

First, because they should. They’ve bulldozed their way into my heart, and if someone touches them, if someone hurts them, I’ll ruin them.

Second, because they need me. They’re not just obsessed. Damien mentioned the word love. They want me here as much as they want their revenge.

“I’m an only child.” Liam’s fingertips trace the skin where I know my tattoo is. Mine are on his scar. Reverent. “My parents love me. They always have, with everything they had in them. They loved their job as well. Both are nursing assistants. That’s how they met, at work.”

He’s not used to this. Talking. Opening up.

He wasn’t planning on telling me any of it, not right away. I caught him off guard.

I’ve been caught off guard, too. I’m naked and vulnerable. The nightmare hasn’t released its grip on me yet. They never go away quickly.

We’re here, regardless. Liam, my captor, brushing his thumb over the heart I have there to honor my brother. He’s so close, the pad of his finger seems to be memorizing my skin. It’s not a random touch, I realize. He has to know.

“My mom—”

“What’s her name?” The question is out of my mouth before I have a chance to do anything about it. I’m being rude, interrupting him, but I care. Their names are as important as the story itself. “And your dad? What’s his name?”

Liam’s quiet. He’s skeptical, considering if this is too fast to let me in. I did curse him, Rome and Damien. I did fight them. I have to explain myself.

“Rex hurt Damien. He said very little, and the rest… I’m assuming the worst. I won’t be surprised if I’m right.” My hold on Liam’s cheek tightens. He doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t waver. “I’m sickened by it. I believe Damien. He won’t answer my questions and I. Believe. Him. Just like I believe you were hurt. I won’t use it against you. I should. It would be the smart thing to do, to think of ways to fuck with you, to want to have the upper hand. I promise you I won’t. Because I believe you. Because you stole my virginity—”

“Took.” Liam’s thumb on my skin burns. Punishes.

“Technically, you kidnapped me, so…”

The darkness does a lousy job at hiding Liam’s blazing eyes.

“What I’m trying to say is, only half of me hates you. The three of you. The other doesn’t. Don’t shut me out. Help me understand why I’m here.”

Liam’s eyebrow raises, and I swear I hear a noise. I lift my head to look behind him and he pushes me back down. My head collides with the soft pillow.

Nothing about Liam is soft. “Eyes on me, little flame.”

“Okay.”

“Nancy and Gerald. Jerry, really.” His parents. Liam picks up where he left off. “My mom was torn between staying at home with me and keeping her job. It was a calling for her, helping people. Until this day, that’s what she does. Both of them.”

Liam’s lips curl up. Cautiously, as if the movement is strange to him. He can’t help it, though. He’s proud of her.

“Judith was my babysitter for years. Made me lunch and dinner. Sometimes breakfast, depending on my parents’ shifts. We’d watch her shows after I was done with my homework, or we read together in the living room. She had the kindest green eyes.” The faraway look in his gaze disappears. Liam’s features harden. “The year I turned eight, Judith passed away. Pneumonia.” The memory hurts him, and he hides it so well. Almost too well. “Aria, our neighbor’s teenage kid, offered to take her place. She was sweet on the outside. My parents and I had no idea what she was like. A monster.”

My nightmare. Our histories. Our pain.

It’s all out in the open. All blending together in my head, in my heart.

I’m raw and sensitive, listening to Liam’s story. I want to inject myself into his past, pull him out of there. Save him from what’s already happened. Make it stop.

Catch Blake before he drowns.

I can’t. I can’t, and God, it hurts.

“What’s this?” I didn’t think it was possible, for his fingers to dig deeper into my skin. They do.

The anger in his voice is audible, reminding me of Damien.

Something about my reaction sets them off. But I’m not doing anything.

“I’m listening.” I stare him dead in the eye. “Or am I supposed to ignore you?”

“Pity me, little flame, and I’m binding you again. Gagging you with my belt.” His eyes burn hotter than the largest wildfire. “I’ll leave you here for

days. Damien won't fight me on it. Rome won't either, as long as I feed you."

This isn't an idle threat. He means it.

Except he's got it all wrong. This isn't pity I'm feeling. It's regret. It's anger that I'm helpless against changing the past. That I can't turn back time and slay his monster for him.

Then again, Liam doesn't need me to fight his wars for him. He's powerful and cold and wonderful.

He needs me to listen.

That I can do.

I slam my eyes shut. Consider his words. Remember the man who held me up straight while he fucked me on the floor. Who had no remorse. Who took me as his captive.

He hasn't been that abused kid for a while. And I don't pity him. I admire him.

"Good girl, Quinlan." He lessens the pressure on my cheek. He likes what he sees when I open my eyes. He's breathing me in.

"Tell me." *Trust me*.

The decision has already been made when he picks up where he left off. "She'd scream at me to finish my homework faster on school days, sometimes over the weekends if my parents had overlapping shifts. Then she'd lock me in the closet for hours."

His breath slows. His scar gets hotter beneath my fingers. I don't dare move.

"She'd bring her boyfriend or friends over. I was a little shit that got in the way." I think it's him growling. No, it's me. Liam is the one who continues, his voice flat. "She said I can't tell my parents about any of that. *No one would babysit a snitch. It'll be your fault that your parents would have to quit their job and be with your whiny ass*."

"That bitch. That fucking bitch." I'm supposed to shut up. To listen. Impossible. "You were a kid."

"I was." Liam slides his hand down my neck, my shoulder. Stopping at my waist, he pulls me to him. "I believed her. I couldn't do that to my parents. Couldn't fail them. I was resilient. Went through almost a year of being miserable. Of being locked up in the closet for hours with a chair leaned up against the knob to keep me inside. I couldn't tell Rome or Damien. They would've fought for me. And it wasn't like that every day.

My parents tried to be there, at least one of them, when their schedule allowed it. So I sucked it up. I hid a book in the back of the closet, had snacks in my pockets without anyone knowing. Aria would've taken it away, and I couldn't ask my parents for a flashlight. They would've figured it out."

He was so smart. Had done everything he could to survive this.

"But the days turned into evenings and sometimes nights. It was impossible to read without the light filtering through the slits of the closet doors." Every part of me touches every part of him. His body. His soul. I'm listening. I *understand*. "The darkness is a beautiful thing, little flame. Truly beautiful, until it's forced on you. Until it's the only thing that's left. Stealing my dad's gold Zippo was my last resort after months of this."

Dread and rage of what's coming crawl up my spine. My teeth slam together in an attempt to abate the shivers. I make it. For him. For my captor. For that boy. For Liam.

"His father passed it on to him, and he planned on passing it on to me when I turned eighteen. Technically, it was mine. That was what I told myself when I took it. I couldn't stand another evening of being locked up. Of not seeing anything even for a couple of hours." Liam's body tenses. My lungs shut down. "Of all this fucking *nothing*."

Eyes. There are eyes on us. Liam pretends we're alone. We aren't.

I have to play along. The others' presence doesn't stop him, and he needs this. I need this.

"I stole the Zippo while my parents were sleeping." Liam's amber eyes go somewhere far away. "Carried it in my pocket at school. Curled my fingers around that lifeline."

Those fierce embers are back on me, and I face him head-on. No pity. No tears.

He strokes my arm. Jesus. The fucking irony. Liam's relaying the story of his abuse and he's the one comforting me.

"That day, she brought her boyfriend. Daylight faded, like it always had, and I flicked the Zippo open." His eyes swallow me whole. "I stood there, in a tight space, surrounded by my parents' clothes. I wasn't paying attention to the flame in my hand. Too busy looking out through the slits, making sure Aria didn't see the light. She would've beaten me up if she caught me with this small comfort. She wanted me to be miserable."

Liam's voice doesn't break. He's okay.

I’m the one who loses it. It’s my throat that’s locking up. My eyes that have tears leaking from them.

“I’m not pitying you,” I growl. “I just hate it. I hate it so much, Liam.”

“I know.”

I should hate him for kidnapping me. For telling his friends it was okay to leave me bound here.

I should, but my heart refuses.

I should, but I wasn’t lying to him earlier.

I care. I want to be here.

“She went into my parents’ bedroom. Sprayed my mom’s perfume on her. She didn’t see the flame through the slits.” Liam’s mouth presses to my cheek. His tongue swipes at my stupid tears, licking them off me. Then his lips are in my ear, and my fingers dig into his scar. Binding him to me. “Mom’s dresses caught fire. By the time I stopped focusing on what Aria was doing, by the time she left the room, the smoke was everywhere. The flames found me.”

Liam pulls back, and the fire from that day is there. In his eyes. On his features. Flickering. Destroying everything.

“Liam…” I try to reach out to him with this one word. Desperate to put it out. To stop hurting him.

“I shouted. Begged for her to let me out.” His glare is deadly. “I never beg. And I did, that day. It hurt almost as bad as the smoke in my lungs. As the flames on my cheek, in my hair. Having to beg her to help me was the worst of it all. Then she…”

I wish he wouldn’t continue. I wish I wouldn’t hear how cruel and inhumane people can be. But that’s not how caring for someone works.

There’s no running from it. No hiding.

“She what?”

“She laughed. Mimicked my voice. Told her boyfriend I was such a fucking baby and that he should ignore me.” Despite the clean air of the room, Liam coughs, clearing his throat. “I pushed the door with my shoulder. I wasn’t as big as I am today. I had just turned nine. It took forever until I broke through the wood shutters. Pushed the chair and got out.” Liam covers my hand that’s on his scar with his much larger one. “Aria didn’t let my parents know I was hurt, only an ambulance and the fire department. My parents were called by their coworkers in the hospital. How fucking hilarious is that?”

There’s nothing funny about that. Not a goddamn thing. “She’s in prison, right?”

“No. Her reason for locking me in there in the first place was that I was violent with her. Threatened to gut her with a knife for fun.” Liam’s voice is cold. His gaze, however, is a wildfire. “My parents believed me. They cried, shouted at the police officers who came to the hospital. They told my parents I was lucky Aria decided not to press charges. She did have a witness. Her boyfriend.”

“Where is she now?” My question is part curiosity, part needing to get to her myself and throttle the bitch. “Address. Give me an address.”

“At home. We got her fired.”

So many other questions follow up his statement. It’s clear, though, from how tightly his lips are pressed together that Liam won’t answer all of them.

“How?”

“We own the company she worked for.”

That’s it?

They’re planning something far more elaborate than hurting my half-brother. This can’t be it.

“What else is there?”

“That’s all you’re getting tonight.” Liam’s hand is around my neck. His lips crash against mine.

His mouth shuts me up.

I want to slap him across his beautiful face. Accuse him of doing the same thing Damien did to me earlier. Tell him it’s getting old.

No one’s letting me in too deep.

My body has other plans. It responds to Liam. My fingers dive into his unruly hair, demanding he come closer. Kiss me harder. His tongue wars with mine, and when I moan, Liam groans for me.

The heat between my legs becomes unbearable with every passing second. With every bite and lick and nip. Every time Liam squeezes his fingers on my neck, he’s driving me to the edge of insanity. He’s pushing me past it.

He’s pushing me away from him. “Enough.”

I’m breathless. Desperate. Wet and annoyed. “Enough?”

“Show me yours, I’ll show you mine, remember?” Liam raises his eyebrows, giving me a meaningful look. “Start talking, little flame.”

My attempt to bring Liam’s mouth to mine again fails.

“It feels wrong.” It actually feels worse than wrong.

It feels awful to tell my story now. His deserves room. Space. Not to be crowded by mine.

“What does?”

“We’re not comparing sizes.”

When I tug on Liam’s hair this time, he grabs my wrist. Flips me on my back. In less than a second, he has both my wrists in his grip, up and over my head.

I’m locked.

“What the actual fuck, Liam?”

“You’re going back on your word. I can’t have that. Can’t let you be a brat. Talk.”

“You people,” I groan, my breaths heaving. Dammit, why do I want him so much when he’s being so stubborn? “You stalked me. You, Rome, and Damien have dug into my life. You know damn well what happened. And even if you don’t, do you really expect me to just nod after what you shared? To be like, *oh, okay, cool story. Here’s mine since obviously I only pretended to care until it was my turn to talk.”*

He glowers.

So do I. “No. I won’t do it. Give it a day, Liam. Give yourself a day.”

“I expected you to be good, little flame.” His cock is hard against my pussy. Throbbing. I feel him through his pants. “Apparently, we have a problem on our hands.”

A whooshing sound interrupts my attempts to fight Liam off me. My head whips in the direction of the sound and—

“You can’t be serious.”

Damien, still in the clothes from earlier this evening, pushes past the bookshelf—correction—past the *secret* bookshelf door.

“Oh, but we are, darling.”

“Very fucking serious.” Rome follows, his gaze menacing.

“Time to talk.” Liam squeezes my chin, turning my face to him. “You’re going to start getting real comfortable around us, real fast. You’re going to trust us. We aren’t asking anymore. Our investigators can’t tell us what’s inside your heart. This is us, little flame. You should know by now how obsessed we are. How relentless we are when it comes to you. And you’re not getting out of this. Not fucking ever. You have exactly one second to talk.”

“Or else?” I dare him. I beg him not to do it.

“We could take turns fucking the pity out of you.” His head tilts. “However, I prefer to… How’d you call it? Yes, give your story the respect it deserves.”

He’s soft for all of a second before his glare catches fire. “Speak, Quinlan. Stop testing me and fucking speak already.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Quinlan

AS IF THE NIGHTMARE wasn't enough. As if listening to the horrors that Liam had gone through didn't rip my heart in half.

As if I'm not imagining what horrors Damien must've suffered by Rex's hands.

And Rome…someone's had to have hurt him too. His obsession with food. Who did this to him?

That has to be what binds them other than their obvious love for one another. Their revenge against the world.

All that pain. It fills the room, weighing so heavily on the four of us that we're being buried under it.

I'm an open wound. I'm bleeding all over the place.

How am I supposed to sit here and talk about Blake? How could I burden them with more hurt? Because it'll do it, the story I've been keeping to myself since I was five.

It'll do another thing. They'll hear about my part in my family's tragedy. They'll see what I do every time I look in the mirror. A failure. The girl who didn't fight hard enough to save her baby brother.

The one who let him die.

I won't. I refuse to talk.

"I have a better idea." My playful tone is fake as fuck. At least it doesn't sound like pity. At least it doesn't sound like guilt. "Why don't you bring

the file you have on me? Read me a bedtime story? Maybe then I'll be in the mood to fill in the gaps."

Liam's eyes narrow.

A tsk at my side. Damien does not approve.

Good for him. I won't disrespect Liam like this. I won't tell them they've been obsessed with the idea of a woman who isn't me at all.

"Quinlan." Rome pries Liam's hand off me, and Liam lets him drag me up on the bed. Rome settles himself against the headboard and pulls me between his legs, my back to his chest. To his soft T-shirt and hard muscles. "What gives you the impression you have a say in this?"

Being folded into Rome's arms puts me in a vulnerable position. Because I want to be comforted by his warmth.

Because he slides a hand to my throat and it's so easy for him to squeeze it. To warn me.

"I can't. Please."

No one knows what happened but my parents and Rex. I was ordered by both to keep it to myself. Truthfully, I never intended for anyone else to learn the truth about that night.

I still don't. "Please don't make me."

"We will. But not like this." Damien climbs into the bed, lowering to sit on his knees at our side. He pulls the covers over me. His knuckles graze my skin, and fuck, I hate that there's so much comfort in his touch. "You won't do it naked."

My breath catches as he presses the covers up to my collarbone, hiding my body from them.

"This will be a clothes-on discussion," he whispers conspiratorially.

Everyone in the room can hear him, everyone can see I'm hardly what you'd call dressed. But he pretends we're the only people in the world. That I'm safe with this monster. With this wounded person.

I feel it.

Damien continues, handling both my hands up, closing my fingers on his to keep them in place. "You'll have this on, as long as you're good."

And there he is. The real Damien. I'm not even disappointed, I just need to deflect until they forget what they asked me to begin with. This isn't fair to Liam. This isn't fair to me, to have all of this taken from me. They'll never want to be with the real me. Ever.

“What’s wrong with you?” My squinted eyes are the one tool I have in my arsenal. My one mask. And I used it. “All of you?”

Damien watches the harsh frown on my face, uncharacteristically silent.

He doesn’t care that I’m mad. Or it amuses him. Probably that.

Smooth as ever, he lowers to sit on his shins. His eyes glint in the dim light filtering from behind the bookshelf.

“For everything that’s holy, what Liam went through turns me into a murderous motherfucker.” His gaze slides from Rome to Liam and then to me. “It’s a knife to the chest. Has been every day for the last twenty-four years. Your story won’t *overshadow* his. It won’t belittle it. And we sure as fuck won’t pity you for it. So you’re going to tell us, for the sake of—”

“Look at it as a trust exercise.” Liam’s hand is firm on my thigh. Pressing it down and pulling it to the side, over Rome’s leg. “By trust, I mean, this is the part you’re going to trust us. No more outsiders stalking you. No more files and pictures. We’re here *asking* to hear it from you, Quinlan. No one else. That’s how it’s going to be going forth. You’ll talk to us. Okay?”

“Gee, thanks for not being completely deranged.” My sarcasm is a defense mechanism.

Doesn’t take a genius to realize it.

Rome isn’t fooled by my tone, that’s for sure. His fingers lock tighter around my throat, reminding me he’s there. That he hears the lie in my voice. That he cares for me still.

The harsh touch cuts some of my air supply. He tips my head toward the ceiling. I can’t see what his hand necklace looks like. Can’t look at the raw, scraped knuckles.

But I’m fully aware of one thing. If he so chooses, he could crush my windpipe.

I’m not terrified of him, though. This isn’t what he’s aiming for, either. The reason I’m clutching to the covers is the fear of going down memory lane. That, and Liam’s story. I swear I can smell the smoke. A part of me is in that closet, right there next to him.

“Little flame.” His hand sears me through the covers, his voice rugged. “My past can’t hurt me anymore. The person who did it will pay. Other than that, it’s uncomfortable. It creeps up on me out of nowhere. And you make it better, you hear? You make it fucking better. Let us make things better for you. Let us offer you what no one ever has, and that’s justice for you. The police reports were falsified, I’m sure of that. Your mind was poisoned with

lies, I’m sure of that too. That ends here. You will talk. You will tell us what happened.”

“You will let us make it better.” Damien leans over me, his teeth a threat on my earlobe.

“Or else?” Not an ounce of poison seeps into my words. But I don’t want to tell them. God, everything hurts.

“You’re testing our patience.” He bites me there, and I shriek. “Cute.”

“Feels like she’s playing a game.” Rome nuzzles my other cheek. “A game you’ll lose, sweetheart.”

“That’s how you’re asking me to tell you about my dead brother?” Maybe I do have a little more fight left in me. “About the worst day of my life? By taunting me? Are you really that cruel?”

“Aww, darling, pretending to hate us again?” Damien’s teeth sting worse than before. But it’s not my skin that hurts. My heart is caving in. “Here I was, thinking we were past this.” He sounds serious all of a sudden, stripped of his humor. “I thought you understood how much you mean to us.”

Frustration, hot and scalding, burns through me. Infuriating tears prickle the corners of my eyes. I snap them shut while Rome still holds me. “You can’t make me.”

“Oh, but we will.” Rome tugs my body to his chest, his scruff on my cheek sparking every nerve ending on my body. “We aren’t that man you were talking about earlier. We’ll never be him.”

“Nothing’s sweet about us.” Liam’s hand trails up my thigh. “We won’t be moving to the suburbs with you. Won’t let you keep playing the martyr part. Rex wouldn’t approve, and guess what? We. Don’t. Care.”

I gasp. Every conversation I had, every interaction, they heard all of them.

“You weren’t even looking for that man, were you?” Damien stares at me, smug and possessive.

“No.” What’s the point of denying? What’s the point of anything anymore? “I was busy and—”

“They were boring,” Liam deadpans. “The men who dared to come close. Bland. Unfit. We’re the right men for you. We’ll take your pain away.”

“Carry it with you.” A tiny part of Damien’s harshness thaws. He’s quick to hide his soft side, planting a kiss to my cheek.

A kiss that’s so tender, so unlike him, and that does it.

My guard falls. I’m being yanked into my past.

Chlorine and grief and agony. The helplessness, fuck, I’m so helpless.

A visceral sob rips from my throat. Another.

I let everything go.

Every. Fucking. Thing.

“That’s better.” Rome’s grip on me loosens. “Break for us, sweetheart.”

“We’ll build you up again,” Damien says against my skin. Another sob and a fresh wave of tears rush out of me. “Stitch you back together. The way we should’ve a long time ago. We’re here.”

“I’m not your rag doll,” I hiss. Sounds kind of pathetic when I say it through my tears. I have nothing left, though. Nothing at all.

“You’re ours. That’s the beginning and end of it.” Liam presses two fingers to my center, making it hurt. Making me gasp. “Your soft parts. The hardened ones. The scars around your heart. When you cry in your dreams, little flame, it’s our tears you’re crying.”

“When you come in them.” Damien’s fingers are firm on my chin, making sure my eyes remain on him. Grounding me. “That’s ours too. Even your breaths belong to us.”

There’s no time to linger on his statement. On what it means. I’m too shaken.

He opens his mouth and I’m thirsty for his words. “You’ve always been ours. I’ve been around you for years. Not five. Since you were born. You always belonged here.” He flattens a hand over his chest. Over his heart. “Always.”

After long minutes of poking, of probing—of telling me in their twisted way that I’m safe here—I collapse completely. My heart is torn in half, the pain I’ve been holding on to spilling out. The gash is too big to hold anything back.

“Where were you, then?”

The little girl who had no one to lean on when it truly mattered, she’s the one who’s crying. Who’s screaming. Not me. It can’t be me. I’m a strong woman. I have my shit together.

Silence. Damien snaps his lips shut, hurt flashing behind his eyes.

“You said you have been stalking me since I was born.”

Rome clenches his fingers on me. Liam’s fingers move to my thigh.

“Go on,” Damien grits.

He isn’t mocking me. None of them does.

This is their psychotic way of telling me they're here to hear me scream. Here to let me be anything and anyone.

They demand it. That I finally break and roar like I should've done years ago.

Even if it's my fault. Even if I brought this on our family. I still blame Damien. He lets me, and I need it. I'll die without this meltdown.

"You're the world's worst fucking stalker, Damien." My fingers tremble around the covers. It seems wrong to keep them there. Too constricting. Like this shield will limit my outburst. "Where were you when I needed you? When *he* needed you?"

Freefalling. I'm free falling. Letting go and trusting they'll catch me.

Scratch that. I don't let go. I dive into the pits of my damaged soul. I bare myself to them, shoving the covers down, hiding Rome's arm around my middle.

I'm losing it. I'm losing it, and it's fine. I have Damien's bite marks on me. I have strong hands and arms on me. I'm safe, and if they hate me after this—fuck, that's fine. I can't hold it in anymore. I just can't.

"Where were you the day my parents thought it was such a great goddamn idea to leave Blake and me at the pool by ourselves?" Where Dad worked, where it'd been fun and safe up until it wasn't. "Nowhere. You were nowhere. No one was. No one cared, you included."

The pool was closed to the public in the evenings. Dad was a lifeguard, so he could go in anytime. Hanging in the cool waters with our parents on hot summer nights was a treat. That's what I remember. Fun, just fun.

Clear blue pool water. The scent of chlorine is sharp in my nose. Pool lights illuminate the depths beneath me. My five-year-old body is secured in a pink flamingo float. I was old enough to get to swim in the ring one. I loved kicking my feet in the water.

Thirteen-months-old Blake was sprawled inside a turtle floatie at my side. His adorable laugh echoed all around us. He laughed harder when I'd splash a few droplets at him.

He was the cutest little thing.

"*We'll be right back, kids.*" I mimic my mother's voice. Her intoxicated voice. "*Look after your brother, Quinlan.*"

Rome growls. Damien's fingers dive into my hair, and Liam holds me as if I might disappear. I won't. There's no turning away from this, now that it's everywhere. I can't lock it back anymore.

“They left us. They disappeared into lifeguards’ changing rooms for grown up time. To fuck, I know that now. And I… I-I was alone. You weren’t there, Damien.” My tears are hot rivers running down my cheeks. Down my chin. Over Rome’s hand and down to my chest and breasts. “You said you stalked me and what? Where were you? Where were you? Where. The. Fuck. Were. You? What was more important than making sure Blake doesn’t roll off his floatie and drown?”

Daggers. I’m throwing daggers at Damien, at the three of them. This is wrong. This is fucked up. They were just kids themselves. They had their own shit to deal with.

They couldn’t have been there for me 24/7.

I can’t stop.

It’s not them I’m blaming. Not really. It’s myself.

The men’s eyes remain on mine. Rome is behind me, but he’s watching me. I can sense it despite how hard I’m crying. How vivid the memory is.

“*They* weren’t there.” My eyes jump between Liam and Damien. Rome finally loosens his grip enough for me to turn and face him. “Why? Why? I couldn’t save him, and I tried so hard. I really tried. I swear I did.”

“I’m sorry.” Liam goes first. With his eyes never leaving mine, he crawls between my legs. Drives a hand into my hair, and Rome moves back to let him. “I’m sorry we weren’t there.”

Tremors ripple through my body. The water in the pool rippled too, when I kicked and paddled with my tiny arms, desperate to be freed from my floatie. I had to get to Blake.

Tiny bubbles signaled the end of his life. *He* was tiny.

He couldn’t swim.

Small and helpless.

Younger than Liam when the fire licked at his skin.

Too young to die.

“You shouldn’t be, Liam.” More sobs. Guilt overwhelms me and it’s hard to breathe. “I didn’t mean to blame you. Any of you. I’m sorry. So sorry. This shouldn’t have happened, but it wasn’t your fault. It’s mine. I didn’t mean—”

“I’m sorry, too.” A voice behind me. The sound vibrates through me. Rome’s heartbeats are strong and steady against my back. “Someone should’ve been there, damn it. You’re absolutely right. I’m sorry we weren’t that someone for you.”

As he holds me tighter, my thoughts go to his knuckles. To him. To the fully stocked pantry and fridge. It isn't really food. It's his safety blanket.

And he's here, apologizing to me. "Rome…"

"I failed you," Damien chokes out, his expression pure agony. I'm being ripped out of Rome's grip by my shoulders, and Damien manhandles me until I'm in his lap. "They had nothing to do with it. *I* failed you. I slept in a comfortable bed that night and many after that. I wasn't there. I didn't look as close as I should've. I should've been there that day. I should've been there always. I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry, for believing that Rex didn't hurt you because he didn't use you as his punching bag."

I'll go back to that later. Ask him to elaborate. When I'm not hanging on to Damien's neck for dear life. When he's not apologizing for something he shouldn't be.

This mean, arrogant man looks like he loathes himself.

He isn't angry with me. Doesn't look like he thinks I'm the reason Blake is dead. Neither of them does.

They hurt, and that, too, is my fault.

"You shouldn't have been there." My hands drift to his face. Cup his cheeks, memorizing his skin like the touch itself could save me. "You deserved that warm bed. Good night's sleep. You deserve all of it, Damien. You shouldn't have been anywhere but where you were safe."

The strong woman that disappeared earlier resurfaces. For Damien. For the three of them. I can be her again. I am her. I'll be that person for them, catch them if they ever fall. I'm even stronger now that I have them.

"Quinlan—"

"No, Damien. You should've been where it's safe," I repeat, injecting finality to my words.

Damien covers my cheeks in his large hands, pulling me to him. I feel his thumb on my tattoo. I feel his heart beating for me.

It does something else—his unhinged, caring heart. It forces me to recognize what really happened that night. To see past the warped truth Rex has been feeding me. That there were more people responsible for Blake's death.

"My parents failed us. They were…" Sigh. "Reckless. They should've never left us by ourselves." This is the first time I've accused *them*. I've been busy blaming myself and taking care of them. Holding everything together and just…surviving. "I should've…fuck."

My lips quiver, and Damien captures the bottom one. He sinks his teeth into it until I can breathe again, his sapphire eyes burrowing into me. *I'm here*, they say. *You're not alone*.

"I was stuck." I want to scream, but I settle for whispering. For using Damien by asking him to take it from me. "I was terrified and shocked, and I couldn't wriggle out of the float. Couldn't jump in the pool to save Blake. I didn't scream loud enough. It's my fault. That's why we didn't tell the police the truth. So they wouldn't take me and my parents to jail. But they should've. He's dead b-bec-because of me."

"Shut up," Liam warns, his command a whip. His hand closes so hard around the back of my neck. There's no kindness in it. "Don't you dare repeat that, Quinlan."

"Ever." Damien seethes, his mouth close to mine. His gaze is as hard as diamonds. "This is the first and last time you've said it. Understood?"

A hand on my hip. Hurting me. Grounding me. "If the answer is no, I swear to God…" Rome's voice is choked. "I'll go over to your parents' home by myself. I'll kill them for being the reason you keep torturing yourself."

If only it could've been that easy. Smothering the guilt like you blow out a candle.

Except it's been eighteen years of self-loathing. Of being alone, without any real support. With my older half-brother who's been giving me the feeling that yes, I'll always have something to make up for.

I had to stay behind to take care of them. Until I couldn't.

And through it all, even when I lived on my own, I was still manipulated by Rex.

But that doesn't change the fact that I'm no less guilty of not fighting harder to break free. To get to Blake.

I'm guilty. I am.

"I was supposed to save my brother. Me."

Damien growls. Rome's hand comes up to my arm, his hold punishing.

"We shared everything, Blake and I. Hair color. Eye color. Bedroom. We even liked the same big, fluffy dolls. I was there. I should've saved him. And I failed."

I'm a shell of a person. The only thing I have in me are my apologies. This is my burden. My fault. No one else's other than my parents and me.

"I'm sorry, Damien."

“Stop it.” He swipes my tears with his thumbs. He’s so serious, almost sounding as grave as Rome is.

“I’m sorry, Liam.”

One of them hauls me out of Damien’s lap. I collide into a wall made of hard ridges and it knocks the air out of me.

My eyes collide with dark, stormy ones. “I’m sorry, Rome. So sorry. Please don’t kill my parents. I’m so sorry.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Quinlan

“I WON’T. FUCK.” ROME glowers. Runs a hand over his face. “But this has to stop. Hands and knees, Liam.”

Liam doesn’t question him, manhandling me. Holding me in place with a hand on my back and another around my neck, making sure I stay in place.

“My fault,” I whisper in-between tears.

“I thought I was clear, little flame.” Liam pushes my hair out of my eyes, brushing it to the side before curling his hand around my neck again. “I told you to shut up about that, and I meant it.”

“So did we.” Damien stands on Rome’s side. Both of them lose their clothes until they’re naked, other than Damien, who keeps his T-shirt on.

They’re hard everywhere without their clothes. Hard and gorgeous and how is it that they don’t hate me?

I don’t get to ask.

Rome’s up on the bed behind me, his hot length pressed to my ass. His hand cracks on my ass, and it’s torture to be on the receiving end of his fury. Spank after spank, he brands my ass. Behind my thighs.

A fresh wave of pain arrives along with it. Teeth clamping on my shoulder. Damien bites me, sucking my wounded skin. Biting again.

“I…” No words come out of my mouth.

Rome doesn’t care to hear the rest of the sentence either. He moves the three of us on the bed so he’s lying on his back. His hands are on my hips,

pulling me flush on top of him.

Damien's there too, positioning himself on top of me. His shirt is soft on my back. His dick pokes my tight hole.

The need to fight either of them off is nonexistent.

This moment is bigger than anything I've ever experienced.

I'm shedding the guilt and self-loathing. I'm *sharing* them. I want to share my body with them. I want to give them everything.

"Next step is…" Damien's hot breath on my shoulder only serves to intensify the pain there. As if he's stoking the fire on my bite mark. "Hating us less."

"I don't hate you at all." He knows that. Has to. "You kidnapped me. What did you expect? That I just roll over and be okay with it?"

"Don't care anymore. This is now. And we're taking care of you." Rome's voice is authoritative. Comforting. "We're going to defile all of your holes. We'll fuck the guilt out of you. Show you what a good girl you are. Have always been."

"The unwarranted guilt." Cold liquid hits the small of my back. I didn't even see or hear Damien reaching for a lube, that's how lost I am. "We'll hurt you, Quinlan." He massages my rim, teasing my hole. "We'll hurt you so bad. You'll never forget we're more powerful than anything else in your life. That we'll always be here to mend the broken pieces."

We're shifting on the bed, and I'm still on top of Rome, just facing the edge of the bed. I look up at the naked Liam. His abs have been carved in stone, and at the bottom, a light smattering of hair trails down to the length of him. To the throbbing cock he fists.

He winds his fingers in my hair, yanking on it while Damien probes into my ass. As Rome moves me up and down his body.

My eyes land on Liam's face. On the vast scar that tells a story of a survivor. On his blazing eyes. A fighter's eyes. A protector's eyes.

"*We* are going to be the only thing in your life," he says at the same time Damien pushes a finger into me. I moan when he shoves it up to the last knuckle. "Starting today, little flame, the rest of the world is background noise."

I could get used to this. Could get addicted to this. No.

"No."

"Yes." Damien pulls out his finger. Comes back with two. He and Rome grab my hips, derailing my escape. "You've taken over our lives, darling."

He fucks my ass with his fingers, adding a third. “Taken over our every thought. Every breath. You’re the best part of our plan even though you shouldn’t have been. You are.”

Rome curls one strong hand to my throat, talking to me while Liam forces my eyes on him. “All we’re doing is taking over yours.”

Taking. Not asking or even demanding.

Taking.

This is addictive. This is soothing and liberating and everything I’ve ever wanted. It’s sick to like it. It’s more stupid of me to stop fighting.

These thoughts barrage into my head when Liam’s grip on my hair becomes excruciatingly painful. He forces my lips to his cock. Slaps my lips with the throbbing head.

I can’t say no to him. I don’t ever want to.

“Fuck,” he curses the moment my lips wrap around him. Curses some more when I gag and cough around the length he shoves into my mouth. “I didn’t mean to do this tonight.” Regret doesn’t stop him. If anything, he pushes his hips forward until I’m choking. “But then you cried so pretty for Rome. And now you’re begging for it. It’s so sweet, Quinlan.” He starts fucking my mouth, and Rome doesn’t let up on my throat. “You needing my cock in your mouth. I could never say no to you.”

Liam pulls out, the move abrupt. I don’t understand why he’s doing it. He’s silent, his eyes sliding to Rome. He’s telling him something I can’t hear. I can feel it, though.

Rome doesn’t just grip me anymore. With Damien’s help, the two men lift me up, then impale me on Rome’s dick. Filling me to the hilt.

The size of him knocks the air out of me.

“Goddamnit, you’re soaked,” Rome groans. Liam releases my hair only by a fraction. Only enough for Rome to bring my face to his for a brutal kiss. “You’re making a mess of my cock, sweetheart.” He starts pumping in and out of me, sinking Damien’s fingers deeper into me. “I fucking love it. You’re such a dirty slut. A perfect little thing. Tell me you know you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“But—”

Liam pulls on my hair. Threatening me.

Demanding that I see the truth. That I couldn’t save Blake even if I would’ve been able to get out and swim toward him. That I might’ve taken

swimming lessons with Dad, but I was no lifeguard. I wasn't strong enough to do anything else other than drown myself.

One coherent thought after the other barrel into me. That's what the pain does to me. It clears my head. It makes seeing the truth as it is that much easier.

"I couldn't do anything."

"That's a good girl." The pressure on the roots of my hair loosens.

Rome grabs me, his kiss brutal. "You trust us."

"All of us." Damien's fingers rub inside me with each roll of Rome's hips. He's smiling. I hear it. Then he bends to my ass and bites me. "Fuck, you're such a good girl. So *ours*. You're never leaving."

The words send a thrill up my spine. They're also a red flag.

I can't be their captive for the rest of my life. They have to give me a way out, even if I'll never, ever take it. They have to—

"Too quiet." Liam yanks me up to look at him. "What's that face for? Still having doubts?"

"I can't be your captive forever."

"The fuck you can." Another bite from Damien.

Liam's expression is severe. Every muscle in his face is pulled tight. "We're not fucking around. You won't be alone anymore. You're not allowed to even think about it. Just like you won't take the blame for something you didn't do. Let me show you, good girl. Keep that mouth open for me. That's it. That's fucking it."

Two fingers force themselves into my mouth, hooking behind the bottom row of my teeth. He forces me to open for him while he's pulling on my hair.

My lips have no choice other than to part for him. They stay open when he releases my lip and holds his cock, shoving it into my mouth. I take him, every inch of him, down my throat. A salty bit has leaked on my tongue, and he's delicious. The way he's stretching my lips and his cock choking me is what I've needed and more. So much more.

"Ah, better." He matches his thrusts to Rome's rhythm. To Damien's as his fingers fuck my ass. All three of them move inside me as one. "Good girl. Take it. Yes, you're so good, aren't you, little flame? So fucking perfect."

They're choking me. With their dicks. Their fingers. With this overwhelming pleasure.

The sick, depraved part of me has finally come out to play. I sink my teeth into Liam's cock. Just a little. Just enough to make him groan.

"You're so twisted. So needy." Liam doesn't slow. Doesn't pull away. If anything, he fucks my face harder. "Whimpering on my dick. Moaning on it. I feel all of it. Every fucking thing. Every time I hit the back of your throat—*oh*, *fuck*—you're wetter for us. And if you want to tease me with those teeth, go right the fuck ahead."

"It turns her on." Rome's aggressive, going deeper. Slower. His thumb on my clit rubs me, and that hurts. Fuck, it's going to make me come. "You have such a perfect pussy. The hottest little mouth. You can fight us. Doesn't matter. You're so wet for this. Such a slut for us."

The orgasm that's been building up in my stomach is a coiled snake. It snaps and, *oh*, *my God*, I'm coming. I clench around Rome's cock, Damien's fingers. Moaning louder around Liam's cock. He groans, far less forgiving now. Pounds that much harder into me.

Through it all, Damien's quiet. Then he's gone.

I'm so empty without him in my ass, even with my two other holes filled by these men. I'm starving for all of them, and Damien's footsteps grow distant.

I hate it. I fear it.

"Look at her, all pretty and worried." Liam must see everything in my eyes.

Rome's hand closes around my throat. "Her pulse. So desperate for Damien in your ass."

"He went to wash his hands." Liam's eyes glint, wicked. "Then he'll hurt you. Can't wait to feel you screaming around me, little flame."

His filthy words and evil look force another long, painful orgasm out of me. Everything is so hot and I'm clenching and unclenching, crying and moaning.

Liam's cursing under his breath, his grip on my hair painful as hell.

"Such a good girl. That's it." Rome's hand slides to my nipple. He twists it between his fingers, drawing out my orgasm. "You need this to hurt. You're so beautiful when you give in to it. Beautiful, dirty thing. Ours to corrupt. Ours to own."

Seconds pass, and it can't be more than ten when I hear him. Then the bed dips and then his hands are on me, kneading my ass.

“I’m addicted to you.” A fresh dose of cold lube dribbles on my crack. Damien wants inside me. His thick crown is there, pressed to my ass, demanding entrance. “Ah, fuck, she’s tight.”

“Let him in, little flame.” More of Liam’s precum runs down my throat. “You’ll come so much harder with him inside you like that.”

“Just the tip,” he coaxes. Even with how Damien has prepared me, his invasion hurts. “Your virgin hole can take it. Push back against me. Be a good fucking girl and do it.”

“Relax,” Rome grunts. It’s a *relax or else*.

Liam slows the roll of his hips. This can’t be good, paired with the pressure from Damien’s cock. My eyes are huge, pleading with him to tell Damien to stop.

He shakes his head, swelling inside me. “No.”

“Liam,” Damien says. “It’s really too bad you can’t see Rome’s cock fucking her pussy. She’s soaking him.”

“I’m going to watch your cock stretching her tight little hole.” They speak to each other over my head, and it’s obscene. It’s pushing me into another orgasm, soon. I feel it. “Then there’s her mouth.” Liam covers my cheek with one of his hands. Pretending to be gentle. Swiping at the saliva on my chin. “Can’t say I’m complaining.”

“Stop fucking around, Damien.” Rome’s hands are bruising me. “Fuck her ass. She needs the pressure. Needs the pain. Make her scream.”

His dirty words reach deep inside me. They’re as ruthless and commanding as he is. Instead of cowering from what he’s telling Damien to do, I’m hotter than I’ve ever been in my life.

I come again. I shouldn’t be able to, but I come again, electricity pulsing through me with every wave. Rome holds me up. Liam does too.

And Damien…

The moment I lose control of my body is the moment Damien pushes through the barrier. Nothing more than the head, just that, but God, he’s so big. He’s huge, and he hasn’t even started.

“That’s my good girl,” he groans, throbbing inside me. His hand runs on the curve of my ass. “Hot and tight. Ours.”

“Fuck *just the tip*,” Liam grinds out. His teeth are clenched. Muscles tensing with the effort. With how close he probably is. “Fuck. Her. Damien.”

Being filled in every one of my holes elongates my orgasm. I'm high, so high, when Damien slides his hands to my hips. I barely register what's going on.

Until I do. Until he's deep inside. I scream and sway forward, away from him when he's burying himself all the way inside me.

The night they took my virginity hurt. They broke something inside me. Filled me up where no one's been before. They weren't quick about it either. Each of them fucked me for so long. Used my body however they liked.

I thought that hurt. This doesn't even begin to compare to that. Rome is huge in my pussy. Damien is just as big in my ass. There's no room for both of them.

They make room regardless. Their cocks drag in and out of me, taking and taking and taking. Pleasuring me.

"You're my most twisted, fucked up dreams come true, Quinlan." Liam's eyes are sharp. He looks behind me, at his friend pummeling into my ass. "He fucks you hard, Quinlan. It's a beautiful thing, watching his cock move in and out of your ass. You should see it. Your tight hole being railed. Taking Damien's beating. So freeing, isn't it? To give in to us. To pain. To pleasure."

"Fuck, I feel it. Feel your tight little pussy sucking me in, sweetheart." Rome loses control of his thrusts. They're faster, as punishing as Damien's. "You're hurting for us and fuck, that feels so good too."

When he thickens inside me, when both pain and pleasure become unbearable, I know. He's close. His hands are on my hips, shoving me down his dick. Rome lets out the most visceral *fuck* while he's spilling himself inside me.

"He's putting babies inside you." Liam's brows knit while he and Damien use me like I'm their doll. With Rome still thick and hard inside me. "You'll be swollen with our babies. So. Beautiful."

"I'm not pulling out until they're done." Rome's hands are everywhere, now that he's done. Choking me. Sliding from my belly to my ribs. Tormenting my breasts in his merciless grip. Hot, vicious fingers circling my clit. Building another orgasm inside me. "Take all my cum. All my seed."

That fear again. That concern over being pregnant by one of them. It sweeps over me, vanishing as quickly as it came.

I want this. I want to have their babies.

I want them.

Liam's cock in my mouth and his hand in my hair. Damien's praise of, "You're such a good girl, taking my cock in your ass like that." Rome who's getting hard inside me again.

That's what I want.

"You like being pounded, don't you?" Liam isn't as confident anymore. His control is slipping. He's going to come, and I did it. I have him ready to lose it. Maybe he already has. "Being used. Being cared for." He hurts me with his fingers. With his cock. "Finally letting yourself be our whore."

That orgasm hurts the most. They wring it out of me anyway, catching me so I don't fall. So I don't crumble and die. That's what it feels like. Dying.

"Fuck, yes." Damien fingers on my hips are as bruising as his teeth can be. "Just like that, darling. Milking. My. Cock. Fuck." He's fucking me so hard. So ruthlessly. "Fuck."

When he comes, he fills me with him. So much of it. He's marking me from the inside and this is bliss. This is what heaven must be like.

"Eyes on me," Liam groans, his fingers tight on my chin. I blink, focusing on him, and see the fire in his eyes. Jaw clenched, every one of his features sharp. Doused with need. "That's it, little flame. Going to come in your mouth. Going to feed you my cum. Swallow all of it. Choke and gag and cough, doesn't"—*grunt* and I moan at the pleasure from having him abuse my mouth—"matter. *Fuck*. You'll swallow it all. Understood?"

I moan my reply, the *yes* I can't say with his cock stretching my lips.

A sound of approval comes from the back of his throat. That's the last warning he offers before hot, salty liquid spills into my mouth. Down my throat.

He was right. I do cough. I do choke on him. And it doesn't matter, just like he said. I swallow it. I gulp, fighting to take every drop while he's still thick and throbbing in my mouth, but I do it.

There's a strong hand on my throat. Not restricting, though. Not this time.

"She's swallowing, Liam." Rome's thumb runs up and down my throat, making sure I'm doing what Liam said. "Such a good girl."

"She is." Damien pulls out of my ass. He hurt me, stretched me beyond what I thought I could ever take, and I miss him there. "Our good girl."

"You are." Liam's next to remove himself from me.

He pulls his boxers from the floor, covering himself. His pants come next. He drags two fingers along my chin, collecting my saliva. They're in my mouth a second later, and I suck on them as if I'm not sore and exhausted and desperate to sleep.

"What about the guilt?" He cocks an eyebrow.

I shake my head. I mean it.

"Good girl." Damien strokes my ass.

"Got any fight left in you?" The corner of Liam's lips tips up. "Thinking about that white picket fence? About us telling you that you're free to leave ever?"

"No." My hair clings to my face. Liam brushes it behind my ear. "You took everything. You gave me everything back. I don't want you to give me the option to go away. I'm so happy."

The emotional pain that's filled up this room before they fucked me isn't gone. It's here, still bleeding from our hearts. Clinging to the walls. Soaking the bed sheets. But it's not suffocating me. Either of us.

Rome releases my throat, helps me off his cock and hugs me into him. "We only took what you were willing to give."

"Please." I'm confused. Who knows what I'm begging for?

Liam. He knows. He lifts me from my armpits, helps me to my back on the bed.

Damien's standing next to me, tucked in and dressed. I'm naked with his cum and Rome's leaking from me. He smirks. A picture of cocky confidence and warmth.

My heart beats twice as fast for him. For them.

"Whatever you want. Whatever you need. Other than leaving." His knuckles trace the dried tear streaks on my cheeks. "You're not going anywhere."

I'm all talked out. I need him, though, so I outstretch my hand for Damien to hold. His much larger one clasps around mine. His fingers close on my shaking palm, squeezing. Comforting.

Rome's lips and scruff graze my cheek when he kisses me, and then he's up and out of the bed. The bed dips a moment later, and a warm cloth is pressed to my thighs. Wiping both my holes clean.

But it's not Rome who's next to me.

"There you go, little flame." Liam's gentle when he cleans me. The change in him makes me sigh. Makes me turn my head to him. Brush his

hair off his forehead, and giggle when it bounces back.

"It won't be tamed."

He gives me a meaningful look, his lips twitching. "Reminds me of someone."

"Maybe."

I close my eyes for a second. I can swear it's only a second. Except when I open them, the three men stand next to each other and the covers are pulled over me.

My lungs constrict. I can't be here by myself. I don't know how I know it, I just can't. "You're leaving?"

"What's this?" Liam tilts his head. "You're asking us to stay?"

I nod.

"Hmm." Damien gazes at me as if he's trying to decide whether I deserve it. "Beg for it."

Neither Liam nor Rome tells him he's being cruel. They're equally resolute.

Exactly what I've been craving for years. The meanest men out there to chase away my demons. Men who'd eventually need me as much as I need them. If they don't already.

"Please, stay." My plea is the sincerest thing to ever leave my lips. "Please, come to bed. I just…please."

They exchange looks—the assholes. But only for a second.

Without another word, they shrug off their clothes down to their boxers. Well, Liam and Rome do. Damien crawls under the covers of the bed first with his clothes on.

Soon enough, the two others join us.

Tomorrow, I might regret breaking down. Giving them all of me. Taking so much that I feel like I can't sleep by myself.

Tomorrow, I might want it even more.

Tomorrow is for tomorrow.

Tonight, being engulfed and warmed by legs and arms and hands, is all I need.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Rome

JAB, JAB, CROSS . Left hook and three quick right ones. Right's my strong side.

I twist my body to the left again. *Jab*. Jump in place. One, two, three, hops. Light on my feet before the uppercut. The contact with the punching bag has my teeth gritting.

The contact is a balm to my shot-to-shit nerves.

Throwing one blow after another helps. The scrapes on my knuckles are raw, leaving red stains on the leather I hurl myself at. My shoulders ache the harder I go at it.

Don't care.

This, this is all mine. The outlet to the never-ending rage simmering in my blood.

Again. Again. Again.

Always on the offensive. Never the other way around. Not even when I practice.

Fuck going on the defensive.

Putting my arms up? Fuck that. No ducking or sidestepping, either.

I couldn't destroy Joseph Langford when I was a skinny kid. When I lived under his roof. When he *owned* me.

Couldn't touch him or Elaine after Anne was born, or they would've used her to punish me.

Images of my sister’s prominent collarbone send me into another fit of rage. Another relentless, breathless storm that I unleash on the punching bag.

Not like I needed the extra push. Not like I was anywhere near calm when I came down here, after everyone went to bed. After I heard the true story about *that* night straight out of Quinlan’s mouth.

No. I was furious on my way down here. Had to smother the need to punch the wall of the elevator. I was this close. Didn’t do it.

My bare fists connect to hard leather over and over and over. Sweat drips down my forehead. On my naked chest. I lost my shirt some time ago. No idea when.

Jab, jab, jab. Two more crosses.

Pain shoots up my arms. Detonates in my shoulders.

This. Isn’t. Enough.

More.

More so I don’t get eaten alive by Quinlan’s words. Her tears. The guilt that’s been forced on her for years.

The little girl left in the pool. The kid who grew up believing her brother’s tragic death was her fault.

A thunder cracks inside me, an electric shock zapping through me.

This feeling won’t go away until I leave every ounce of my anger on the gym floor. So I don’t stop. Don’t even wipe the sweat that drips into my eyes.

Let it run down my eyes. Let it burn.

Better than starting the car, driving downtown and waking Rex up to my fist to his nose. I’d start there, take my sweet time with him. Blow after blow, I’d make him bleed. Make him pay.

And ruin Damien’s revenge. He and Liam would get in the car if I woke them now, no questions asked. They were as furious as I was. But it wouldn’t be fair. Rex wouldn’t suffer as much as he deserved.

I can’t do that to Damien. So I’m here.

Uppercut. Another shot of pain that has my molars gnashing. Fuck that. I have ten more in me. A thousand more.

I’m not done. This monster-sized ache in my chest, my gut—my tainted motherfucking heart—doesn’t go away.

The other version of that tragic night was much different from Quinlan’s. The real one. We read copies of the police reports that described Quinlan’s

family at the pool. They were there with the kids *every second*, according to both her parents.

Thirteen-months-old Blake Palmer crawled along the ledge. Slipped. Fell. His tiny lungs were filled up before either one of the parents could do anything about it.

Lies.

His autopsy matched Carrie and Russel's—Quinlan's parents'—version of events.

Russel received a fine and was fired for going into the pool after hours. A slap on the fucking wrist if I ever saw it.

Neither one of the parents were charged for negligence like they should've. No involuntary manslaughter sentence. Nothing. No one's paid the price for Blake's death.

No one but his sister.

His sister who was left to deal with the pain. With guilt. With grieving parents who forgot they had a living five-year-old child. A child who was hurting as much as they had. Who wasn't sent to therapy. Who wasn't told it wasn't her motherfucking fault.

Quinlan.

Social services visited their home for a couple of years later and we all know how Rex can manipulate them.

Him. Her half-brother. Her much older brother who didn't care about her situation as long as he didn't have to face his responsibilities. Not really.

A million punches don't do a damn thing to calm the roaring beast inside me. The sounds I make are that of an animal. A reflection of my growing frustration. Of the fury I can't contain anymore.

Goddamn it, nothing hurts enough. Nothing fixes this.

We smelled bullshit, of course we did. Given her dad's years of experience, he should've been able to give Blake CPR and save him. But we had no proof. The cameras around the pool were out of order. Quinlan, the only other witness, told the police officers at the scene that yes, that was exactly what happened.

They guilted her into saying that.

They…

Hook. Jab, jab, hook. The strongest, most painful punches and I'm nowhere near satisfied.

My fists could kill a man. Instead, it’s this miserable punching bag that doesn’t talk back. Doesn’t cry out in pain. I don’t hear his bones break.

It’s my chest muscles that pump. My shoulders take the hit.

Quinlan.

Her name is nothing but a breath. A scream. A call for action.

She’s not here, but we finally have her. Safe. Cherished. Up in her bedroom, sleeping. She’ll never hurt again. No one will ever guilt her into thinking she killed her baby brother.

Surprisingly, that gentle train of thought helps. I’m as furious as ever, but I feel *her* hand on my skin as if she were here. And I’m…not better. I might be getting there, though.

I need more of that.

When I walked out on them, she was warm. Enveloped by Dame and Liam. Worshipped in her sleep.

Our version of…

Love.

Yes. That. That strange, foreign creature festering inside me. The thing that’s eating up all the available space.

A parasite. A cure.

Ours.

She won’t get any anniversary cards from the three of us. We won’t make a big deal about Valentine’s Day.

We will, however, burn the world down for her. We’ll be there for her happy days. Hold her through her nightmares. Catch her when she falls.

Annihilate each and every one of her demons.

The biggest one of them being Rex.

The so-called man who loves her. He probably had for a while. Until Blake died. Until they became a burden in his eyes. The three of them. And he figured a five-year-old could manage.

He could’ve—fuck that, *should’ve*—done more than drop food at their place. Should’ve moved in there.

Hell, I could’ve left home at eighteen. God knows I hated every breath I took in that motherfucking place. But I had Anne. My sister. My blood. She was never a responsibility or a burden. I loved her. I had to take care of her. That was that.

Eight years of added torture were nothing compared to leaving her there by herself for even for one night.

That’s what Rex should’ve done for Quinlan. Be there for her. She didn’t just lose her baby brother. He didn’t *just* drown before her eyes. She lost her entire family that day. Her parents checked out.

Alone. She’d survived. She made it.

And she was all alone.

Right hook. I imagine his face there. A tooth flying out at my punch. His nose caving in. Blood gushing.

I’ve done that over the years. Imagined Rex’s face along with a few selected others.

Never like this, though, with this level of hate. Maybe because it’s fresh in my head. Maybe because I can’t stand to be just another person who’s failed her.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

My punches have no rhyme or reason anymore. I’m going after the punching bag blindly. After Rex. After the throb in my head.

If I’m not careful, the broken bones would be mine.

He didn’t lift a finger for them. Quinlan was the one who sought therapy for her parents. Damien watched her making the calls. She was a teenager when she did that. Didn’t cry. It almost sounded…normal. No tears were shed throughout these calls. She didn’t look distressed.

Damien wouldn’t have let it slide if he’d think she was breaking down.

He never saw her making food for her family. She’d have to have done it in the crack of dawn so she could go to school after.

I feel bad for him. I bet he hates himself for missing these signs, when he shouldn’t. He’d done his best to stalk her. He’s obsessed and grateful and adores the fuck out of her. I’d have to repeat to him what Quinlan said later. None of this was his fault.

The sounds of my fist connecting to the punching bag echo in the otherwise silent gym. The pain in my knuckles intensifies.

Right hook, left. Jab, jab, jab, cross. One of Rex’s eyes swells shut. I’m coming from the side, and his blood coats his mouth and chin. He gurgles, trying to defend himself.

He can’t. He won’t.

Useless piece of shit.

I’m about to land another punch when I feel it.

My arm stills mid-motion. My bare feet plant themselves to the floor. My shoulders tense.

Someone has entered the gym.

Not just anyone.

Her.

The smart move would be to settle my nerves before I turn around. Collect myself. Let the storm settle.

Here, I'm relaxing my shoulders. Dragging in a long breath. I'm fine.

I am not fine.

"Rome?"

Quinlan's not supposed to be here. She's not supposed to be able to leave the apartment.

She's not supposed to be anywhere near me when I'm this worked up. When I'm—

"Rome?" Her palm rests on my sweaty shoulder.

I shake her off, whipping to face her. I overdo it. It's too fast.

I'm still nothing close to being fine.

Both my hands grip the sides of her neck and then… I pick up on that scent. Food.

Being starved for long periods of time enhanced my sense of smell. For years, I'd been hunting for it. Literal breadcrumbs. Anything my parents might have forgotten to lock away.

A bite for me. The rest for Anne.

My nostrils flare. I hunt for the source of it, and I find it. One hand around Quinlan's wrist, and I lift her hand up between us.

A chocolate bar. The colorful wrapping has been peeled, the untouched chocolate stares at me.

"What's this?" There are more pressing questions, like how she got out of the apartment. How she knew I'd be here.

This takes precedence. This trap.

Quinlan's after my secrets.

I admire her for it. I want to hand them over to her, too. To be as brave as her and Liam were up there, in her room, when they opened up the way they did.

Impossible.

When I'm like this, I can't do the right thing.

There's only war inside my head.

Whoever let her down here made the wrong motherfucking call.

“Chocolate?” she says with those pretty plump lips. Lips that are swollen from our abuse. “For you? Thought you might be hungry, um, after your workout?”

“Hungry?”

I haven’t been hungry in years. Whichever one of my friends brought Quinlan here ought to have known that. They didn’t tell her my stomach is always full. They let her walk into the lion’s den anyway. Let her see me in this state.

Another side of me. The real me.

This wasn’t the wrong call. I get it. Still hate that she’s here. That she looks up at me, into my eyes, and sees me.

Her attention flickers to the three punching bags behind me, cautious before she returns them to me. I glower at her. Her cheeks redden, and she lets her gaze slip down my body. She can’t move her face because I hold her there by her neck, but her eyes wander.

Her cheeks turn a deeper shade of red when she takes in the straining muscles of my chest, of my abs. My joggers hang low on my waist—fuck gym shorts, hate those—and Quinlan’s attention stays there, her pulse racing.

She likes what she sees. A weakness that my feral, evil side leverages on.

“No, I’m not hungry.” My hand on her neck drags my prey closer. She looks up, eyelashes fluttering. “But you brought food, and we don’t let it go to waste in this house.”

“So you’re—”

“You’re going to eat it.”

“I’m not—”

The moment she opens her mouth, the chocolate bar goes in.

“Rome,” she murmurs around it.

“Bite down, Quinlan.”

The idea of force-feeding always seemed as abominable to me as starvation. And I don’t force-feed her. This isn’t it. This is a game. A power play. A game Quinlan’s on board with.

Satisfaction. Abundance of it. It’s swarming through my veins. Sick and depraved. Her obedience does that to me. Humiliating her, that’s another pleasant outcome. Gets my cock fucking hard.

“I’m so pleased.” I press her chin up, clamping her mouth shut. “Be a good girl for me and swallow.”

Quinlan’s throat bobs, and I tighten my grip on her neck, feeling it.

“Rome…”

“Again.”

I repeat the steps until there’s nothing left but the wrapper. I hurtle it to the side, breathing hard. She has some chocolate left on the seam of her lips, and I use my thumb to swipe at it and shove it into her mouth.

My pulse hammers as loud as hers. We stare at each other.

She’s waiting for me to say something.

“Want to tell me what you’re really doing here?” The question comes out harsh. Too harsh.

I’m aggressive.

This is bad, having her around me now. With Rex’s bastard face in the front of my mind. With her tears burned into my memory. While adrenaline doesn’t flow through my blood, it consumes it.

I’m a murderer. I haven’t killed anyone yet, but I might just as well be called one. I am going to kill the people who raised Anne and me. I’ll take my sweet time with it, too.

This is the person Quinlan’s staring at.

Bravely. Chin high. Shoulders pushed back.

She has no armor on. In one of Liam’s dress shirts, a pair of dark leggings and sneakers, she’s vulnerable. Breakable.

I shake my head internally. I don’t destroy beautiful, delicate creatures. Won’t ever crush her like I plan to do to the real monsters.

And she’s so beautiful. How does that even happen?

How come she doesn’t flinch?

“I’m here for you.” The blush on her cheeks burns brighter under the harsh lights of the gym. “You left us. I was worried.”

“Is that so?” I keep sounding like an asshole. Keep imagining her broken-hearted and crying in that pool, and I don’t settle down for her. I snarl.

“I wanted to know where you were.” She lifts her chin higher, takes a step closer. “I wanted to talk.”

“You should’ve stayed in bed.”

Too late, though. Both my hands are around her neck, fingers sliding up to her jaw. I’ve caught her.

I’m the worst fucking man. A true monster to be this rough on her.

But my heart is a mess. And she brought me food, for crying out loud.

I need to shield her. I need to possess her. I need to get a handle on this.

Can’t.

“Liam—” she gasps when I press my thumbs to her jaw. When I start choking her. I can’t stop and she doesn’t try to pull away. All she does is place her small hands over my large, sweaty ones. “Liam. He let me out of the penthouse. He came down the elevator with me.”

“So you know.”

“That you’re locking me in the penthouse from the inside?” Her taunting has my lips twisting. She’d be so much fun to play with. All by myself. “You went to work. You think I didn’t test the door?”

“I bet you did.” My head cocks to the side. The predator in me assesses this bold, reckless little lamb.

“Makes sense.” What a daring little thing she is, raising an eyebrow at me. “I’m a captive, right?”

The sick need to devour this woman feels a lot like anger. How dare she, stand here, so beautiful and brave that it hurts to breathe around her?

No one has the power to hurt me.

“You are.”

One movement takes both of us to the black rubber floor, me on top of her. Locks of sandy blonde hair spread wildly around her head. Her fingers grasp onto my neck.

“You asked Liam to leave, anyway.”

“Yes.” I had her breath knocked out of her, and here she is. Recovered. “For you.”

Robbing me of my sanity.

“There will be consequences for your little transgression.” My legs straddle hers. My hands are on her face, pinning her to the floor. Caging her in.

Her nose scrunches. Even with her eyes red and puffy from crying, even after she bared her heart to us, Quinlan has the audacity to look indignant. God, I love that.

“Liam said it was okay.”

“Liam isn’t here, isn’t he?” My jaw tics. “Just you and me, sweetheart. So here’s what’s going to happen next.”

This isn’t about sex. It’s about control. And fuck, am I ever in control over her. One hand slides around Quinlan’s throat, the other peeling her hands off me. Her arms go over head, wrists locked in my grip.

“What?”

“You’re going to tell me why you’re really here.”

“Or else?”

My sweaty chest presses to the clean shirt on her body. Her heart thrashes in her chest, the loud hammering beating doing things to me.

“You’ll find out what being captive truly means.”

A wicked smile spreads on Quinlan’s face. “Oh, yeah?”

She’s so dirty. The glint of crazy in her eyes is beyond tempting.

It’s a red cape to a bull. A dare.

And it only took her a couple of hours of sleep to regain her strengths.

“Test me, Quinlan. Please do.”

The challenge in her eyes suggests that she’s about to do just that. My senses pick up on it.

Truly, truly adorable of her.

“What did my friends tell you while I was here?”

Her entire expression changes. The hint of a grin shifts into a scowl. Sadness begins to cloud her gaze.

“Rex hurt Damien,” she whispers.

“I asked about the last two hours.” The threat in my words is audible.

“Liam…” Her chin wobbles.

I’m an animal, not heartless. I let the sentence hang in the air, not making her repeat it. “Yes. Liam.”

“You must have been hurt too.”

Colors flash before me. Red. Black. White so bright I growl at the pain.

“Rome?” Her choked voice carries me back.

I’m leaning too much of my weight on her slender body. My hands squeeze her wrists and throat. Hurting her.

“What about me?” I tug on Quinlan’s wrists, hurting her. Then I lower my voice, because there’s no way I’m letting anyone in the building hear me. “You want a reason to pity me, sweetheart? Or, let me guess, you wonder what I’m going to do for revenge. If I’m here boxing because I plan on killing a man with my bare hands. Or a woman.”

For the first time since she’s come down here, Quinlan is speechless. No words come out. And thank fuck, the pity I taunted her about isn’t there behind those gray, gorgeous eyes.

“What part shocked you the most, sweetheart?” I bring my lips to her cheek, tasting the fear on her skin. Fuck, it’s addictive. I let my lips run along her jaw, her cheek, relishing in her shivers. “That someone abused

me? That I have plans to end someone's life? Or is it that I don't give a fuck that your wrists hurt? That you're my captive?"

"No one touched you." A breath. "Not like they had Damien. And it wasn't an outsider, like Liam's sitter."

"You have no idea what Damien went through. What your half-brother did to him." I deflect. I'm not ready to open up. "Or did you two talk before Liam brought you down here?"

"He's the only one who'd gone to bed with his clothes," she says, as if it explains everything.

It does. It explains all of it.

I'm quiet as I stare at her.

There are a few things I value more than anything in this life.

The people who are closest to me. Having food available to them and me at all times.

Managing my anger issues while making sure no one overpowers me. Ever.

BLF Capital.

And trust. Love doesn't mean a damn thing without trust.

"Let me get this straight." I stand up, picking her up with me. She gasps when I throw her over my shoulder and start walking.

"Rome!"

Quinlan's so small compared to me that her kicks and punches are just… sweet.

"Rome!"

I sit down on the nearest gym bench. Manhandle her until she's lying with her stomach pinned to my lap and her ass held high up.

"What are you doing?"

The first time my open palm connects to her butt makes her scream.

Makes my cock hard. My pulse jackhammers. Not like I'm going to do anything about it.

I'll fuck her another day. When I'm in control of myself.

Right now, I'm way too raw. Way too…

Fuck that. Vulnerable isn't the word.

"What was that for? Rome, answer—"

Smack. Smack. Smack.

"I thought I told you how I feel about snooping." *Smack.* "And yet here you are. Came all the way down here instead of going to bed like a good

girl. Trying to dig out my secrets."

"Rome, listen—"

Smack.

"I'm close, aren't I?"

"Please, if you could listen—"

Smack. Smack. Smack.

I wish I could see her ass reddening. But if someone other than Liam and Rome walked in here and had a glimpse of what's mine…

"Tell me why I'm here and I won't pry." She's thrashing in my hold, hating it that I'm stronger. That I have a hand around the back of her neck, holding her in place. "Damn it, Rome."

Tough shit.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

I go hard on her. I'm mad at the world. I love watching her squirm.

The tortured sounds coming from Quinlan are almost as sweet as my own pain.

"Tell. Me. Please." She pushes against me, and the pressure on my cock is good. So fucking good. "Rome, please."

Her resilience is such a beautiful thing. I'm dying to capture it in my palm. Tuck it into my pocket. Jack off to it whenever she's not around.

She'll always be around.

"Stop," she begs and, fuck, that's beautiful too. Her thick locks hide her face, and still, there's no denying how beautiful everything about her is. "Please, tell me. Stop, this distance, this wall. I can't take it."

My palm hovers over her ass. "Why?"

She sighs, tilting her head. I push it back down. "I want to help."

"You hate the thought she'll find out about the pain. About how deep it went." Damien's words come back to haunt me. Taunt me.

I'll tell her. I'll tell her everything. Soon. She's just started to get used to us. To me.

Time is running out. I'm aware. I'm also not ready to face her rejection. To go through more days of her locked up in her room.

She's already heard of my plans to murder someone. I basically admitted to it when I was all up in her face. She hasn't run from me yet. Hasn't called me a monster.

What happens when she learns it's them you're after?

Well…

Quinlan’s sweet. So sweet. Not that sweet, though, because she believes in revenge as much as we do. She offered to kill Aria. Demanded it.

Would it be that horrible to tell her the people who were supposed to love me the most did everything to ruin us? That I fantasized about the day I get to kill them?

Worse still, would learning it’s these people do it to her? Would the pity start then?

I don’t know. And between having her lock herself up in her room or feel sorry for me, I’m stuck. Nothing good will come out of this.

Better wait. Better hold back until I have to come out with it.

Here and now isn’t it.

“It’s late, Quinlan.” One quick swoop and her stomach is pinned to my shoulder again.

I’m on a mission to get us back home. Not to captivity. Not to her *prison*. Home.

I don’t bother with finding my T-shirt. They can donate it or throw it away for all I care.

“Please, Rome.” Her hands aren’t busy punching me this time. They’re splayed on my back, rubbing me. Comforting me. “I want to belong. I want to help. I’m here.”

“You’ll still be here tomorrow.” At the elevators, I nod at Cody, the building’s security on this floor. He nods back, like me carrying a woman over my shoulder is the most normal thing in the world. “And the day after, and the day after that.”

I smash the button for the elevators. Wait.

“You’re horrible.”

“You’re adorable.” I skim my palm over her ass as I step into the elevators, away from Cody’s eyes. She’s ours. “Sweet too, for coming to look for me. I appreciate it. And we will talk.” I’m finally breathing. Finally, I’ve been around her long enough that I’m less of an animal, more of a man. The man who wants her so bad it hurts. “For tonight, be quiet and let me tuck you back in. Where you’ll stay. I’ll join you after I shower.”

“I’m not a child,” she groans on our way up to the penthouse.

She isn’t. It’s the starved kid in me that’s fighting her. The kid wasn’t sure he’d survive some days. Who couldn’t protect Anne.

But I can protect Quinlan.

Of her past, of heartache, of any fucking thing.

I will.
Like I’ll get over myself and tell her everything.
I. Will.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Damien

FLICK. SNAP. FLICK. SNAP.

Liam's engrossed by whatever he has on the screen of his computer.

I'm watching him from the doorway to his office. I'd flat-out ask what's there, except he's in a trance. I'm curious, but I know better than to startle him.

That Aria bitch slapped him around as a punishment for spacing out. For not going fast enough into the closet. He didn't tell that part to Quinlan two nights ago. Didn't go into the horrible pieces he told us while he was high on drugs in the hospital.

What good would it do? So much pain had bled into that bedroom. Enough to last a lifetime. I wouldn't have said a word either.

You barely said a word, period, asshole.

Fuck you, voice.

Eventually, I knock on the door twice. Soft.

Liam lifts his head from the screen. Sitting up, in his dark pressed suit with the evening setting behind him, Liam stares straight ahead. Looking without actually seeing me.

Slowly, his vision clears. There he is. "Hey, Damien."

"You're in the middle of a research project." I don't move from my place at the door.

Our last big acquisition, the DriverGone deal, was finalized yesterday. We haven't discussed any future ones since. This has to be a good one, if he's onto something while our hands are full with Quinlan and the impending execution of Rome's revenge.

A genuine smile threatens to break through at the mention of her name. It's been two nights in a row that the four of us slept in the same bed.

We've been waking up with her. Had breakfast together. She wore my shirt to bed last night. Mine.

"Damien, you're not listening."

It's my turn to blink until my friend comes into focus. "You didn't say anything."

"Yes, he did." Rome sidesteps me, walking into Liam's office.

He's wearing a midnight blue suit, a shade darker than the one I'm wearing. Like mine, it's been tailored to his body, moving with his as he takes one of the seats facing Liam.

I came to check on Liam, but apparently there's a meeting I wasn't told about.

"Thought there were no secrets between us." I close the door, taking the seat next to Rome. I'm not upset. I am curious.

"There aren't." Liam grabs his Zippo, twisting it in his hand.

"Oh." My eyebrows rise. "This is about playing with Quinlan *and* the Zippo? I approve. I bit her hard last night. Drew blood. She can take it."

Quinlan took a lot more than that last night. I left bite marks on her breasts, shoulders, her legs. This morning, I caught her smiling at the pattern of my teeth on her. Right there, an inch from the crease separating her thigh and her pussy.

Rome wasn't easy on her either. He didn't talk about what happened in the gym. She didn't ask him anything. Instead, he choked her. Grabbed her wrists as if she'd run from him. Spanked her ass red.

Liam, though, he hid his kinks. We'd never fucked anyone together. We haven't fucked anyone but her, period, in years. Were never too much into random hookups to begin with.

But I could tell what Liam wanted. It started at her apartment. Last night, he eyed the Zippo a second too long before he climbed into bed.

"Hilarious." Liam's grip on the Zippo is tighter than usual, now that I've planted that idea in his head. Called it. "Wasn't asking for your permission."

"Then?"

“What were *you* thinking about?”

Fuck, I don’t make it a habit to be this obvious. I shrug, crossing my arms over my chest. “Can’t stop thinking about how we should’ve kidnapped her much sooner.”

Liam stares. Rome’s expression is flat.

When Rome and I fucked her, I meant it as a sex thing. After that first night we slept together, it became something else. Whenever I think of the years she’s suffered by herself, a knife twists in my chest.

I’m serious enough for my friends to see that I mean that too.

We’ll make it up to her. All those years. She’ll forget about them; we’ll make sure of that.

“We couldn’t have been there.” Rome pats my shoulder once, puts his hand back in his lap. “We could’ve done more, that’s also true, but at the end of the day, we worked with what we had. It hurts and I feel the same guilt as you do, but we can’t go back and change anything. She’ll have the best future up ahead. That’s where our focus should be.”

“Yeah.” My teeth clench. Every trace of humor is sucked out of me. “Just because she went to school, because her parents didn’t look that bad, I… Fuck. Just fuck.”

“She’s ours. Nothing will hurt her ever again,” Liam sums it up, concise and to the point as ever. “Speaking of. You two can expect an email from Quinlan in”—his gaze slides to the screen, eyes growing dark—“three… two…one.”

Our phones buzz. All three of them.

“You haven’t been busy with research.” My need and something that feels a lot like love push me out of the chair and rounding Liam’s desk. “You’ve been watching her work.”

Her email interests me. Of course it does. The love she puts into her work, into us. Those little signs that show she cares.

I’m dying to read it.

I’m dying to look at her beautiful face on Liam’s screen.

“I have.” Liam’s tone is flat. He can fake indifference all he likes.

Problem is, we’re childhood friends. I know this guy better than he knows himself.

As does Rome. “You’re falling for her.”

“And?”

I’m finally there, standing next to Liam’s chair, hand pressing to his desk.

Our Quinlan is on the screen.

My God, she's beautiful. Breathtaking.

Our captive.

My savior.

Raising a finger, tracing it on the screen, it's a subconscious movement. My body craves the feel of the soft skin, where her tattoo is, so I do it. I get lost in the face on the screen.

Her long sandy blonde hair is piled in a messy bun on the top of her head. She's wearing a gray tank top I dressed her in after we soaped and washed her beautiful hair.

If her laptop's camera would go lower, I bet I'd find her in the charcoal leggings Rome picked out for her.

A little frown curls her lips down, drawing creases on her forehead. She's concentrating on another project for one of her other clients. We can see it on the small window in the bottom right on the screen.

She's safe.

Rex is still out there, a risk. A bigger one with each passing day, since he's started suspecting Quinlan isn't really a captive. That she's with us of her own free will.

We've been informed that he's read her emails to her parents. Maybe he even thinks she really ran off. That she sends her parents money and ditches her responsibilities.

He hates this. Yesterday, he had to go visit his dad. Quinlan had paid for two more weekly sessions, and his dad skipped one. Rex had to go there when no one picked up the phone, then smashed a plate against the wall. He didn't like it that his dad forgot his Uber ride and slept throughout the afternoon.

We can't allow her to go see them with him out there.

With him knowing I'm the one who has her.

He'd kill her. Or hurt her. Unacceptable.

The scars on my abdomen send a sharp pain through the rest of my body.

She has to stay in our penthouse. Nowhere else is safe for her.

"Okay, that was an easy fix." Quinlan leans back in her chair, and I forget all about that bastard.

She's braless, and when she's sitting like that, it shows.

She fought us on that, even more so than she had about her parents.

“What if one of my clients wants a virtual conference?” Her hands were on her hips, her gaze accusing. “Could you at least let me put on a sweater?”

Quinlan knew we were watching her laptop. She’s aware of the consequences of disobeying us.

“You’ve been such a good girl.” Rome was at her front. His palm cupped her cheek, gripping her. Warning her. “But if you miss your punishments, we’re not opposed to the idea of making it happen. We’ll take great fucking pleasure from it, sweetheart.”

Gray eyes bounced across the room. Quinlan wasn’t pleading for help from any one of us. She was assessing if Liam and I were game too.

Our gazes and my sly smirk were her answer. We would, in fact, punish her. Gladly.

“It’s my job.”

“No virtual conferences today.” I moved to her side, my hand reaching to pull on her hair. Because I could. Because after years of feeling like my heart would never be whole again, I had her.

“But my business.” Such a sweet plea.

“Your business will be fine.” Liam tugged on the collar of her tank top, releasing one, heavy breasts. Her nipple peaked.

Mouthwatering.

“What will it be?” Liam held her breast in his palm, his thumb brushing her nipple. “Are you going to be good?”

“Please.” She inhaled deeply, goosebumps prickling her beautiful flesh.

“You can wear one tomorrow.”

Hesitation. Then this adorable frown curved her lips down again. “Why are you being assholes? I thought we were over this.”

“We’re only giving you what you want.” I burrowed my lips to the curve of her neck, kissing first, biting. Sucking on her throat until she screamed. “Or are you going to stand there and lie to us? It’s turning you on, being told what to do. What to wear.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Liar.” I moved out of the way in time to watch Rome’s fingers denting her cheek, rougher than before. He twisted her head to him, his lips and hers colliding.

Her screams turned into moans. It was beautiful. She *was beautiful.*

“Here’s an order for you. Tell me what happened to you. Both of you.” Her words were a breathless plea when Liam hauled her into his arms, folding her in a hug. A bone crushing one. He enjoyed the feel of her squirming.

Join the club.

“We’re together.” Her voice was a low growl. “You owe me an explanation. Many of them. You’re making me feel left out.”

“In two days, you’ll find out yourself,” Liam whispered, his mouth pressed to the top of her head. “Maybe Rome will have it in him tonight. Be patient.”

“Let me help you. Please.”

Rome and I exchanged looks over her head.

Mine said, You’re running out of time.

His answered, I know.

At least that ended the bra argument.

On the other side of the screen, Quinlan yawns, stretching her arms over her head. Her top clings to her breasts. I shake my head. This obsession will be the end of me.

Every drop of blood in my body races south. The pressure in the front of my pants is intolerable.

I bet they’re hard too. How could they not?

Pretending Quinlan isn’t the most beautiful, exquisite woman alive is impossible. It should be a crime.

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap. Flick.

The faint smell of butane reaches my nose. Liam does that when he’s concentrating or when his anxiety kicks in.

Apparently, he also does that when he needs to fuck Quinlan.

“I’m this close,” Rome murmurs. “This close to going home early.”

“To fuck Quinlan some more before she meets Anne in two days?” I ask. “Make her fall for you so hard she won’t try to run away with your sister?”

Rome’s eyes cut to mine. They’re dark. Intense. “Worst fucking moment to mention my sister.”

“When the air in the office is as thick as your dick?” I’m taunting him. Smirking. Some would call what I’m doing cruelty. Quinlan would, for sure.

It isn’t. All I’m doing is nudging him in the right direction. He could fuck her tonight, alone even. Jealousy is the furthest thing from my mind.

He can do that after he talks to her.

“Seriously?” He straightens to his full height. Liam snaps his Zippo shut, his gaze flicking between us and the screen. “What the actual fuck, Damien?”

“Awake, finally.” I mirror his posture, my smirk widening despite the anger simmering beneath my skin. At him. At myself for being just as much of a coward.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’ve been fucking Quinlan for two days. Feeding her. Taking care of her.” If not for Liam sitting between us, I’d be in Rome’s face. I could, his office is big enough for me to take a step back and I’ll have Rome’s collar in my hand. I don’t do that. “And stalling. I get that it’s uncomfortable, but guess what would be even more fucking uncomfortable? You, killing your parents *and* expecting Quinlan to be okay with it without any forewarning. Without her knowing what abusive useless fuckers they are.”

Like I should before I kill her half-brother and expect her to fall for me. To *love* me.

I’m such an asshole.

“She almost has it figured out.” Rome’s hands are fists at his sides. They’re not raised. Not yet. “This is between her and me. Mind your own fucking business.”

“She *is* my business. You three are.”

“Hey. Enough.” Liam’s staring at the two of us, scowling.

I’ve never been angry with Rome. Then again, I’ve never been this angry with myself.

This is worse, this self-loathing, than it was the day I came to Rex’s home late. We had dinner at Liam’s, the three of us and Anne. I shouldn’t have stayed there for so long. The second I stepped foot into this hellhole, I knew I fucked up.

Then I saw it. Jagger and Laurel huddled in the corner of our room and Rex and his wife drinking beer, binging on their frozen meals. Jagger was naked from the waist up, using his shirt to soak Laurel’s blood on her stomach. Rex and Harlow cut her, and I wasn’t there.

My body rippled with rage. I scrambled to the floor to help clean them up, but the damage was done. That was the only time I hurt myself. Pushed two fingers into one of the wounds in my stomach.

But this is worse. Quinlan deserves better, and she won't get it. I'm all she'll ever have. Me and my friends.

This isn't Rome I'm angry at. It's all me.

The cloud of rage, though, it's blinding. It's numbing. I'm past recognizing my mistake.

"She's figured out that someone's hurt you." I step around Liam's chair, my finger mashing Rome's chest. Liam doesn't get up. Doesn't say a word. "But for some reason, you're still pretending to be this big, untouchable person. You're a fraud."

I'm a fraud. *I* couldn't protect Laurel and Jagger.

Me.

"You don't think I know that?" While my voice doesn't rise over a hiss, Rome's thunders. "She's mine just as much as she is yours. She deserves better. Deserves honesty. I fucking know."

A knock at the door.

"What?" Rome and I both snap.

"Is everything okay?" Tatum peeks inside, one hand on the door, the other smoothing down her plum-colored jacket. "The walls are thick here." Her gaze flicks to Rome, half-apologetic. "Not soundproof."

"Can we—" I clear my throat. Force a smile that can't possibly reach my eyes. "Can we help you, Tatum?" It's a dumb question, since she clearly came here to tell us to shut the hell up. Keep this argument between us instead of the whole office. "We're done for the day. You're free to go home, if that's what you're here for."

"I could stay." Her expression is sincere, and I have no doubt she means it. Tatum helped us build this company from scratch, filed contracts and made phone calls until we'd order her to go home and rest. "Solve this… thing between you three. I'll help."

"We appreciate it." Liam slams his Zippo on the desk, his voice clipped. "We've got this. You're dismissed for the day. Thank you."

Tatum's brow furrows. Neither of us has been rude to her. Least of all Liam. "Are you—"

"Positive." Another snappish response. He's upset.

This isn't our argument that's got him like this. Something's happened with Quinlan while we were at each other's throats.

While I wasn't watching her.

“Goodbye, Tatum.” Rome isn’t looking at her. He’s focused on the screen too.

“Okay.” Tatum nods. Understanding shines in her eyes. “I’ll be heading out.”

“See you tomorrow.” I’m the last to speak before the door shuts close behind her.

I can’t cut my gaze to Liam’s laptop’s screen fast enough.

“What the fuck,” I mumble, the argument with Rome a distant memory.

Tears stream down our girl’s cheeks. She’s typing and crying and I can’t stop myself. My fingers are on her again.

As if she feels me, Quinlan pauses. Looks away from her email and into the camera.

“Jesus, it’s embarrassing.” She swipes at the tears with her knuckles. Her heart tattoo shines, the skin glistening. “I hope you’re not watching. Stalkers.”

She snort-laughs, the sound a pained one.

“Sweetheart.” Rome’s voice has lost its venom.

“What is she crying about?” I ask Liam while keeping my eyes on her.

“Here.” Liam wraps his fingers around my wrist. Touches me like one would a wild animal as he removes my hand from the screen. “See for yourself.”

Liam gestures to the email she’s been writing in the smaller window. He taps on the mouse to pull it up on the screen. Clicks on the keyboard to turn on the volume just so my shredded heart would shred some more at hearing her sob while we follow the words on the screen as she types.

Hey, Mom. Hi, Dad.

I need to talk to you about something. It would hurt, and I’m sorry about that. But I can’t keep it in any longer.

Two nights ago, I was in so much pain. The night Blake died returned to me. My brother. My heart bled. I could hardly breathe. I screamed, and it wasn’t enough for all the pain I felt. I was choking.

I still am. Some moments, long hours, I’m fine. It doesn’t last, though. I can’t stop feeling everything. I’m broken. Don’t know if I’ll ever be fixed.

I’m furious. At you. At the world.

You didn’t mean for Blake to die. You loved him as much as I have.

A part of you died there in the pool with him. I have no doubt about that. About how real your pain is.

So is mine.

My baby brother is gone, and I'm never getting him back.

Finally, after years of surviving, some people helped me realize this wasn't entirely my fault like I was led to believe. I could've screamed louder, but it wasn't all on me. It wasn't and isn't fair that you let this go on for as long as you have.

Still, I forgive you. I can and I will, until the day I die.

What I can't do is stay in that damned pool for the rest of my life.

I love you. I'll keep supporting you financially. I'll schedule appointments and make sure you get the best treatment possible. I can afford to send you to a good facility, where there'll be professionals to look after you around the clock.

That's the best I've got. I can't do this anymore, this constant fear. The constant grief. Blake wouldn't have wanted it for us. I don't remember much of him, but during the short time he was here, he was sweet. He was good.

He was the heart of our family.

We'll continue being one. A family. Just…a little different. I hope you understand.

We'll talk soon. When I can call, I guess. If you'll answer.

I love you so much,

Quinlan.

She sucks in a few labored breaths.

Neither of us breathes. Liam doesn't minimize the screen of the email. Doesn't do a damn thing. He's as frozen as we are.

"Oh, well." Quinlan moves the cursor on the screen, her voice raw from crying. She clicks the Send button. "It's not like they'll read it. At least it's out, right?"

Liam slams the laptop shut. I'm faster than the two of them, breaking into a sprint to the elevators.

"Damien," Rome calls out.

Tatum says something, but he's too far for me to hear it.

This agonizing need to haul Quinlan into my arms hurts. Viscerally fucking pain slashes through me.

I'll die if I don't get to her before anyone else. Before I take my next breath.

For years, I've missed the signs. I've been obsessed with revenge, with making Quinlan mine. With watching over Rex, making sure he doesn't

physically hurt her.

And I've neglected the rest. Her grief. How abandoned she's been.

I should've gone to her faster. Not as her lover—I haven't felt anything romantic for her for years.

As her guardian.

I thought I'd been that person for her, and I failed.

No matter. I'm fixing it.

The three of us started helping her through this together.

We're finishing it tonight.

Right after I get to her.

First.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Quinlan

THIS INCESSANT POUNDING WILL be the end of me.

My head. It's a mess. My eyes are mashed into my palms, puffy and still wet from crying. The tears have only subsided a couple of minutes ago.

I haven't been able to get up from my desk since.

Sending that email to my parents hurt like a motherfucker. I had to do it, and I did.

I just had no idea how painful it'd be. Burying the ache in my chest only worked for so long. Working, fucking and being cared for by my captors, it healed some pieces of my bleeding heart.

Until I wrote the damn email.

There was a sense of finality in the words I typed out to my parents. Of a closure I wish I never had to experience.

In some ways, it would've been easier if I'd kept believing Blake's death was all my fault. I made my peace with it. Gotten used to it. The weight of the guilt has been all I've ever known.

This, all of this, it's new.

My family sacrificed me.

That's a fact. That's my closure, and it's left me hollow.

There's no joy in a tragedy. No relief at the dark, bitter end of the tunnel.

I guess that truth is worth something. I just don't feel it.

A dire, unhinged laugh escapes me. Out of everyone, my kidnappers opened my eyes to it. They forced me to navigate through what's real and what's not.

They watched me shatter into a million pieces, then picked what was left of my soul off the ground and nursed it back to sort-of-health.

Parts of me haven't healed. I don't imagine they ever would.

But I feel like I'm able to go on with my life. I have a purpose. A new one.

To help my three men.

My chest heaves again, fresh waves of tears rising. This annoying, unwelcome sting, prickles at the corners of my eyes. I press my fingers to my closed eyelids, forcing them away.

People hurt them. My half-brother hurt Damien.

At least the men didn't see me cry while I was emailing my parents. I'm sure they didn't. They would've called otherwise. They wouldn't have let me cry by myself.

The three of them might be cold and cruel. They might have revenge plans in the forefront of their minds. They're going to kill people. Their abusers.

And they care so much. About *me*. I see it when Rome insists that I eat. When Damien's smile loses its wickedness. When Liam wraps his arm around me at night, his touch says the words he can't always say.

They would've called to check on me.

"Or I could be delusional," I say to the void. "Maybe they wanted my secrets to have leverage over me."

My fingers rake through my hair, free from the restricting hairband. I tossed it on the wall before. That, and a pillow. Didn't help.

The pain is still here. But hey, I tried.

"Maybe I am a fuck doll." The words are spat out of my mouth. A futile attempt to mask the pain in my soul.

Disappointment settles in the pit of my stomach. Grief contributes to the never-ending pounding in my head. The fear of being abandoned clenches my heart.

"A pawn on this fucked-up chess board. Maybe I'll be…"

A hysterical laugh bubbles in my throat. I've never been this miserable in my life. Never allowed myself to get this lost in self-pity.

There’s never been a moment for me to do it. I always had to move forward. Had parents to look after. A big half-brother to please.

Here, in this quiet space, where I’m literally not allowed to take care of my family, I finally have the time to do it.

Inside this room, I’m allowed to curse. I’m allowed to be upset. I can be whatever I choose.

“Maybe I’m only here to bait Rex.” I hardly believe my own words. I say them anyway. Who’s here to stop me? “After that, that’s it. Out with the trash. It’ll be hilarious, won’t it? What a fucking joke. I’ll end up being the one begging them to stay. They’ll be the ones kicking me out. That’s why Damien and Rome don’t trust me. They know I’ll be out of here soon. God, I’ve been such a fool. Gullible, stupid me, so desperate for affection. I mean nothing to no one. Not really. I’m no one.”

My thumb goes to my tattoo on my cheek.

“No, that’s not true. I’ll always be Blake’s big sister.” A sob. Fuck, I thought I was done with the tears. “He’ll always be my baby brother. Just the two of us. I won’t beg anyone to keep me. When they’ll kick me out, I’ll go with my—”

“Get up.” Damien’s command is a shock to the system. A bite to my flesh.

I didn’t hear the door. Not like he needs it.

The bookshelf.

Fuck. Has he been here for my meltdown? Watched me talking to myself?

Are the others here with him?

“Damien, let me make this easy for you.” If he’s here to tell me I’m right, I’d rather not look him in the eye. “I’ll be here until you’re done with your revenge. I’ll leave right after. It’s fine. I get it.”

“Get. Up.” His harsh demand leaves no room for argument.

The violent energy vibrating from him fills up the whole room. No humor. No games.

“Don’t keep me waiting. I won’t repeat myself, darling.”

It’s his version of *You’ll be sorry if I do.* I hear it.

I gaze up at his reflection in the window, and I see it on his face. Tall and gorgeous and imposing his suit. His thick eyebrows are drawn together. Sapphire eyes glaring at me from behind. The rest of his features are as sharp as they were the first day I met him.

They punctuate the underlying threat of his words.

Refusing him will get me nowhere.

I don’t want to refuse him.

Slowly, I push the chair back. Get to my feet. Stare back at him through our reflections in the window.

My heart cracks at how beautiful he is. It’s being split down the middle by how not mine neither of them are.

Being fucked and praised, having a roof over my head and enough money to ensure my parents are taken care of, that’s nice. Really, truly nice.

The hollow parts of me need more than that. I can admit it to myself now.

Love.

I love him. All three of them.

I desperately need them to feel the same. To tell me they haven’t been lying to me.

But I can’t ask them to say that. For the sake of what’s left of my pride, I will not.

“Hands on the desk.” His footsteps echo in the silent room.

He pulls me out of my own head. Forcing me to focus on him and the imminent threat he imposes. I hurry to do as he says, shoving my laptop forward so I can put my hands there.

“I said…” My hands hover just over the desk when he’s behind me. Too late to do it on my own. His fingers curl around my wrists, his grip brutal. He’s ten times more vicious when he slams both my palms to the wood countertop. “Hands. On. The. Desk.”

I could breathe a second ago. With Damien’s front flush against my back, I’m struggling to let air into my lungs. His weight pressed to mine, the bruising grip—and just him—make it so I’m no longer my own person. I’m his...until I’m no longer useful to him.

When he lets go? When the three of them leave?

I’ll regroup. I’ll return to being this strong, independent, lonely woman I’ve always been.

I will.

Sigh.

It’ll hurt. It’ll be agony on top of all this grief I’ve finally allowed myself to feel.

Fuck it.

I’m done sobbing for the night. Done crying for a lifetime. My expression hardens, my shoulders tensing.

I twist my head to him, our gazes clashing. “Now what?”

“Attitude. I like that.” His thumbs brush the tops of my palms. They’re the only soft part of Damien. “You’ve been crying.”

“What gave me away?” I’m being a bitch. On purpose.

“Quinlan.”

My heart races, demanding to leap out and get to him. To all three of them. With them, I’m cared for. Cherished. I mean something. That’s what I thought.

My head isn’t as foolish. My head refuses to let me fall for the lie.

My head creates a wall around me. Helps me help Damien get to the kicking me out part faster.

“The red, puffy eyes? Or did you stalk me?” I curl my lips into a snarl. “Through the stupid laptop? Wow, I just love the way you three trust me.”

“Go on, darling. Get it out of your system.” He releases one of my wrists to shove the strap of my tank top down my shoulder. His teeth sink in. His mouth sucks on my flesh. I scream. I moan. Until he stops abruptly. “All the lies you’ve been telling yourself about us. The pain from that day in the pool. The grief that poisons your blood. Let me hear it.”

“You don’t trust me.” I’m talking about my email correspondences. I’m talking about their secrets. “You’re using me to hurt Rex. I’m nothing to you.”

Damien understands. His palm is a shackle around my hip. His teeth are a silent threat as they graze up the curve of my neck. “Go on.”

His cock presses to my back. He’s hard and huge. A shiver runs up my spine at the contact. At how Damien teases me with his cruelty. He’s telling me it’s coming. He’s telling me I’ll scream.

He gets off on prolonging it, on making it worse for me. He’s harder when he pushes the front of my tank top down to expose both my breasts.

I look at our reflection in the window. His hands are back in place, one on my wrist, the other on my hip. He’s towering over me. So big. So intimidating.

He makes a low sound at the back of his throat. He’s losing his patience when I don’t speak.

“There’s more. I can’t help you if you’re not talking to me and I’m not leaving before you do.” With a rough roll of his hips, he slams me into the

desk. “So unless you want this to hurt, give me everything. I want to hear you.”

“You’ll leave me. You’ll kick me out.” And there it is, out in the open. I would be embarrassed to admit to this vulnerability out loud, except Damien is there. Staring back at me. A force to absorb whatever I throw at it. “I’m here to be used until Rex is—”

Damien whips me around, his hand on my chin, tipping my head up. I’m facing him. I see him. Glowering. A destructive force, ready to ruin me.

A shield to protect me against my own damn self.

“Say it,” he hisses. “Until Rex is what, Quinlan?”

“Dead.”

Whatever my half-brother did, it was terrible. Rex ruined a part of him. I hate him for it. I hate him for laying a finger on a child. On anyone.

“After he’s dead. I’ll be useless to you.” I close my eyes. It’s too painful to look at him. “This is just another manipulation, making me believe you like me. Once there’s no more Rex, there’ll be no more me. Just say it already.”

“God, I love you.”

My eyes fly open. The widest they’ve ever been.

“You’re so perfect, darling.” His lips brush mine, sapphire eyes so dark they’re almost black. “And so, so terribly wrong. I love you. I’m never letting go.”

I’m not sure what comes first. If his hands are on my cheeks or his mouth crushes into mine. It’s impossible to tell, and fuck, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that he’s owning me. All that matters is that he loves me.

He’s meant it. He really has.

He loves me.

Damien growls, drives his fingers deeper into my hair. He tugs on the roots, forcing my head higher, closer to him. He bites my bottom lip. His tongue lashes against mine. He’s tasting me, punishing me.

“I. Love. You.” It sounds like a curse. Like he’s angry that he couldn’t say it before. “A world without you in it isn’t a world I want to live in. I’m nothing like him. *We’re* nothing like him. We’ll never use you. We want you so bad it hurts, damn it. We just want you. Just you, Quinlan. It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this, but we can’t let go. We won’t let go. Is that what you wanted to hear? Does that clarify things for you? Do you understand how important you are here?”

He grips my wrist, thrusting it to his heart.

I blink. My breaths are as rugged and labored as his.

Yes, that's what I wanted to hear. What I needed.

My brain is scrambled. My pulse is loud in my ears.

The desire for this man is turning me into a feral woman. A twisted woman who craves his love more than anything. And his touch.

I spread my legs, and Damien rewards me with a violent thrust of his hips.

"This comes as a surprise, I see." His thumb brushes my hardened nipple, and when he pinches me, I moan for him. "Not for me. I've loved you for years, Quinlan. From the very start. And I will *always* love you."

The heavy air in the room becomes even denser. I didn't think it was possible. Then again, we aren't alone anymore.

"Sweetheart." Rome walks up to us, peeling off his jacket and throwing it on the floor. He steals me away from Damien and I can see what this is. I see it in Damien's expression. He's *letting* Rome take me. "Crying by yourself instead of calling us? What's that about?"

"I thought…you didn't tell me anything, because you knew you'd get rid of me."

Rome's thunderous eyes and clenched jaw are terrifying. He's a thunderstorm. A hurricane. I talk regardless. I need to expel this…thing inside me. I need to believe Damien. I need to believe them.

"About you and the walls you two have built around yourselves."

"Tomorrow," Rome groans. Kisses me. One hand in my hair, the other on the side of my neck, and that's all it takes for him to own me. He yanks me so hard into him that we're almost one. When he pulls back, his voice is hoarse. "Tomorrow, we'll talk. I swear it. And, Quinlan?"

I feel Rome. Feel what he's going to say in this loud, deafening silence. I ask, anyway. "What?"

"I love you." Each word is calculated. Strong. As powerful as the man who's saying them.

My heart lurches out to him. My soul begs me to reciprocate. To admit that I've fallen for them, as wicked and controlling and ruthless as they are. That they have a million secrets, and none of them matter.

I've fallen for them, and nothing could ever change it.

In my fragile state, though, saying all of this is too much. I'm too confused and emotional and raw. Instead, my body talks. My hands rise to

Rome’s neck. To the pulse that’s beating erratically beneath his fingertips.

“Why won’t you tell me tonight?”

The answer I’m looking for doesn’t come from Rome. Liam materializes out of nowhere, jacket off, sleeves rolled up to his elbow. I’m in his arms in the blink of an eye. Flames flick behind his gaze, his mouth pressed into a set line.

“I love you,” he starts. His mouth is on mine, his tongue swiping at my lips. “Tonight, little flame.” One second, I’m looking at Liam. The next, silk covers my eyes. Lights out. “You’ll learn to trust us. You’ll see how well you know us. The only men in your world.”

Rough, scraped knuckles trace the curve of my spine. Then Rome’s fingers tug at my tank top.

His hands rip it apart.

“You are.” My breath picks up, a desperate attempt to get more air into my lungs. “There’s no one else. You won’t leave me. I know that now.”

“We have to make sure.” Rome’s impatient when he shoves the tank top off me. “You haven’t been acting like you believe in us.”

“Like Rome said.” I hear the smirk in Damien’s voice. The taunting. His grip on my hair isn’t playful at all. He’s at my side, tugging on it, and a dark, short laugh is what I get for my surprised yelp. “You were alone with all these fucking thoughts, crying. Hiding from us.”

“What should I have done? Begged for you to care?”

“If you’d have trusted us.” Liam’s fingers bite into my cheeks while a third pair of hands pushes my underwear and leggings down my legs. Rome’s.

“You’d have known there’s no need to beg.” It’s Liam again, his hands cupping my breasts, my waist, his lips skimming my jaw. “You’re ours. We love you. If you’re hurting—be it from guilt or grief or pain—we’re here for you. There’s nowhere we’d rather be than be here for you.”

“You’re going to see how well you know us.” Rome grips my hips, pulling me to him while Liam holds me up for balance. He shoves two fingers into my pussy, curling them. “We’re going to play a little game.”

“By the time we’re done with you”—Damien licks my cheek, pressing a soft, deceiving kiss to my tattoo—“you’ll know each one of us very well.”

“You’ll never forget the lesson from today.” Liam’s voice is followed by his rough hands, pushing me to my hands and knees. His lips are in my ear, his hot breath making me wet. Makes me shiver all over. “Other people

won’t matter. No. One. We’ll love and take care of you for the rest of your life. Only us.”

“Liam,” I call out when his warmth is gone. “Please.”

He says nothing.

Sounds of belt buckles, zippers and clothes dropping to the floor, echo in the deafening silence. My fingernails dig into the plush rug beneath me. Goosebumps prickle on my sensitive skin. I’m exposed, emotionally and physically. Completely bared to them. Vulnerable.

Rome promised, though. He said he’ll be honest tomorrow. He’ll be vulnerable too. Will make me feel less disposable.

Damien didn’t promise a thing, and yet… I’m sure he’ll do the same.

My lungs expand, fresh air filtering in. I’m no less terrified of what the men have in store for me. Whatever it is, it won’t be sweet. They won’t tend to my soul with sonnets. I won’t have more love declarations whispered in my ear.

This is going to be bad. Painful.

A shiver stops my next inhale, lodging it in my throat.

Humiliating. It’s going to be so humiliating.

“Here’s how it’s going to go,” Damien starts, his voice coming from my front, but lower, like he’s on his knees. His punishing grip on my chin is the first thing I feel. He tips my head up, yanks my bottom lip down. The second is the head of his cock tapping on my mouth. He’s damp. He wants me. “We’re done talking. Won’t say anything other than confirm or deny if you got it right.”

“Got w-what right?” I’m having trouble talking, my words garbled with his dick on my lips.

“Which cock…” Another set of lips is at my ear. Liam’s next to me, his scar brushing against my skin, his hand is on my throat, catching my gasp. “Is fucking your pretty little mouth.”

My ass stings as soon as he’s done explaining the rules. A belt has connected to my flesh. Over and over, again.

Rome.

Why, *stop*, and *oh*, *God*, are my senseless pleas that he doesn’t seem to hear. He doesn’t relent. Doesn’t stop.

There’s no telling how many times his belt has cracked on my ass. I’ve lost count after five. He could’ve reached a hundred or two. The pain is *that* agonizing.

That humiliating. I’m hot all over. My nipples are peaked. My tongue darts out, searching for more of Damien. I cry out when I don’t find him there. I need one of them to be inside of me.

The belt drops on the carpet with a muted *thud*. Rome kicks my legs apart, making it harder to stay upright. And I’m bare. My arousal at what he’s done—at what they’re doing—to me, is there for him to see.

“Mmm.” He drops to the floor. One of his hands grabs a fistful of my ass, opening me further to him. With the fingers of his free hand, he swipes at my inner thigh. “Soaked. You like the pain, don’t you, sweetheart?”

I’m lightheaded. Out of it. Rome has beaten the sass out of me. It’s taken him—what? ten strokes? Twenty?—to turn me into a puddle. I’m all want. All need.

“Yes.” The desire for them hurts more than anything I’ve ever experienced. “When you’re the ones hurting me.”

“Not that much that you’ll cheat, I hope,” Damien’s half-asking, half-threatening me. His hand is in my hair, raising me to my knees.

“Cheat?”

He’s holding me upright, and I know I won’t fall. I know he won’t let me go. Still, my instincts have my hands lurching forward to grab his thighs for balance.

Damien’s chuckle is dark. I’m not afraid, it’s just my body responding to the danger he poses. I cower back, though I can’t get far.

Liam’s hand is a vise around my throat. Rome acts as a barricade behind me. His hands are on my hips, stilling me in place.

“The belt strokes are your punishment, little flame.” Liam’s hand slides up and down my throat. That, too, is a threat. “Every wrong answer will land you ten of these. That’s how much we love you. How much we own you. For fucking ever.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Quinlan

“I’LL CALL NEXT TIME.” The walls are closing in around me. I’m in so much pain. Picturing more of their belt strokes is intolerable. I wouldn’t be able to stand it. I already can’t stand it. Can’t stand how much I want it. “I’ll call. I’ll call when I’m sad. When I’m happy. When it hurts so much, I can’t breathe.”

Hurt me, please. Own me.

“Oh, I forgot.” Damien bats my hands away from him, walks back. He’s leaving me to Rome and Liam’s mercy. “She said some things before you two got here.” He’s cold, talking over my head. His twisted version of love. “Quinlan here believes we’ll kick her out after we’re done with our revenge plan. We told her we loved her, but…”

“Got to make sure you remember that part, too. Ingrain it in your head,” Rome growls. “We’ll take care of your little problem, sweetheart.”

My whimper goes unnoticed. He and Liam leave me, getting up as I stumble forward.

“Up on your knees, darling.” Damien’s voice comes from somewhere behind me. I do as he says on wobbly legs. “Hands behind your back. Clasped. That’s it. That’s a good girl.”

“We’ll each take turns fucking your mouth,” Liam says, and I hear what lies beneath his indifference. He wants me. He’s barely holding on.

How could I ever think otherwise?

“When we pull out”—Rome completes Liam’s sentence—“you’ll give us an answer. There’ll be no rewards for you until we decide we’re done. Only punishments for getting it wrong. Understood?”

Excitement and fear war for dominance inside me. I’ve seen, touched and had these three men in my body for less than a week. I would never be able to tell them apart.

They’re setting me up to fail.

I’ll enjoy their punishments. I dread them.

Or maybe…

I do know them. Beneath the insecurities and pain and everything else that’s poisoning my head, there’s them.

Each one of them has their own shape. Their grip on my hair is different. They’re unique.

They’re mine.

Maybe that’s exactly what they’re after. For me to forget about everything else and focus on nothing and no one but them.

They’ve been obsessed with me for years.

Over the short time I’ve been around the three of them, I’ve become just as obsessed.

That’s what they want me to remember.

“Quinlan,” Rome demands an answer.

“Understood.”

The room turns silent except for the erratic beat of my heart. Their breaths are muted.

When fingers hook under my chin, I realize I haven’t heard the man who walked up to me.

His fingers are smooth, his touch rough. He could be any one of the three.

The man’s other hand winds in my hair, and I’m forced to look up. Then two of his fingers are on my teeth, shoving my bottom lip down.

Whoever’s there makes a satisfied sound and I think… I think this is—

No time to think. My mind goes blank when this man’s cock is shoved past my lips, as deep as it’d go.

His groan has me clenching my thighs. The pleasure is intense, and I can’t do anything other than give in. My toes tingle. My breasts are swollen with need. My hands ball into fists at my back.

I moan around him. I open my mouth wider for him, consenting to his brutal thrusts. To his vicious grip on my hair. I gag and choke on him,

gasping for air. I cry out each time he hits the back of my throat, when he uses me like I'm nothing to him. Carelessly. Ruthlessly.

Or maybe he treats me like a diamond. Like I won't break.

I can't think of a name. With this thick, smooth cock in my mouth, I only want more.

The wise thing to do would be to try to smell him. Flatten my tongue, run it over the ridges of his cock. Taste this man. Try to make sense of who he is.

I'm too far gone in the sensation to do any of that. I just *feel*.

Too soon, he pulls me off his cock. Pats my head and leaves silently.

My mind is a mixture of pain and humiliation for being used as a hole to fuck. Even though it's more than that. This is more than sex. This is about us, cementing our connection in a sick, depraved way.

In the best one possible.

"Well?" Rome's impatient. Snappish. "What will it be, Quinlan?"

"Making us wait will land you five strokes," Damien teases. I bet he's smirking. "Please give me an excuse to have fun with the belt."

Neither of them sounds breathless, like he's been forcing himself into my mouth. That only leaves… "Liam."

The first blow to my ass hurts the most. It's the surprise, the shock. I stumble forward, and before I collapse to the floor, there's a hand on the side of my neck.

"Wouldn't want to get your beautiful nose broken," Liam whispers. "Even though I really feel like hurting you right now. Mistaking me for someone else…" He tsks. "We'll have to amend that. I'll be fucking your mouth a lot more in the future, little flame."

His voice is warm and smooth. His grip on me is brutal.

The things his voice does to me soften the worst of the pain.

If only for a second.

"Two, three." Damien's the one administering the blows. "Four…" He pauses, torturing me. Then he continues. Ten blows in total.

I promised myself I wouldn't cry anymore tonight. Could swear I was done with the tears.

Laughable. I'm fucking laughable.

Hot, salty rivers pour from my eyes and down my cheeks. I'm soaking the tie, and it clings to my face. The pain in my ass is horrible. The

humiliation stings just as badly. The way I crave it stings even worse. This is the worst.

This is the absolute best I've ever felt.

"Such a good girl," Liam praises. It doesn't change things. Doesn't lessen the pain and embarrassment. His tongue on my tears does nothing to lessen it. I keep hurting. Keep crying. "Concentrate harder, little flame. You know us. You know you do."

My chin wobbles. "Who was it?"

It's Rome's turn to laugh. A clipped, wicked laugh. "No."

"Please," I say to Liam. To the next man to yank at my hair. "Please."

Please, I'll do better. Please, I'll call next time.

Please, don't stop.

The man who takes my mouth next is gentler than the one before him. Barely. His grunts are louder, more feral. His precum leaks into my mouth, straight down my throat and I swallow it hungrily.

My lust and need and love are fierce. Except this isn't the time to just be used. They're doing this for a reason.

I'm reminded of Liam's words. *Concentrate harder, little flame*.

I try. I do.

Yes, here it is. These groans. These sounds that are only his. The texture of his cock and the shape.

I recognize him.

This is Liam. It couldn't be anyone else.

He pulls out, presses his lips to my tattoo, and walks back to the other two.

"Liam," I blurt out.

"You sure about that?" Rome taunts.

One of the other men slaps the belt to his palm, or another part of their bodies. A warning.

"Yes." I'm not deterred. That was Liam.

Someone comes at my back, his hand lacing around the front of my neck.

"That's our good girl." Liam kisses the same place he had a minute ago and goes back to join the others.

Another man arrives. His hands are on my cheeks, his grip firm. It hurts, his possessiveness.

It also gives me the biggest clue to who he is.

I keep my guess to myself, though. Don’t make a peep or tell them I know it’s Rome. My orgasm coils in my belly, and my lips tingle with anticipation.

He takes me, and I let him. I’m putty in his hands, quiet and submissive. I’m his, and I want it. All of him.

He’s hard, his tip is wet as he swipes it across my lips.

Fuck, he tastes good.

Then he fucks my face and I’m reduced to pure need. To aching desire. To a moaning, needy woman.

I’m nothing but theirs.

He groans, and it’s beautiful. Visceral. Part man, part animal.

Mine.

“Rome,” I breathe out. “You’re Rome.”

“Very good.” He bends toward me, his hands on either side of my neck. “I’ll let you in on a little secret, sweetheart. It was me the first time too.”

I gasp, narrowing my eyes, glowering at the darkness. “You tricked me. Again.”

“Tricked you?” He rips the blindfold off, his dark blue eyes the color of a storm. “I don’t remember anyone of us saying anything about you getting a different man each time. I could’ve been here, fucking your face, again and again and again. I could’ve had a lot of fun, messing with your head like that. I even considered it.” “Why?” I ask, though the answer is clear.

“Why?” I ask, though the answer is clear.

“Wanted you to recognize me.” He’s naked, moving to lie on the floor while pulling me on top of him. He’s teasing my clit. Pinching my nipple. His lips are on my shoulder. “*Needed* you to recognize me.”

My ass burns, but I ignore the pain. I welcome it, leaning deeper into Rome and spreading my legs to straddle him. “Why did we stop? Damien?”

He and Liam walk up to us until they come into view. Liam’s cock is in his hand, and he’s stroking himself.

Damien’s still fully clothed. “You think you’re getting a pass from sucking me off, darling?”

“Maybe,” I poke the psycho bear.

Rome lines his cock to my pussy, shoving himself inside me. All the way in.

My pussy squeezes around Rome as he thrusts into me, as he reaches for my other nipple. Pinches and tortures me. I can hardly breathe. I still have

to ask, “Did I do something wrong?”

Liam’s glaring at us, his gaze heated, hands curled into fists.

But it’s Rome who speaks. “Told you she’d love the belt.”

“I loved…” I suck in a breath. I’m spread open, pounded and used. I’m not vulnerable anymore. This is home. These men are home. “I loved having you in my mouth. And yes. The punishments.”

Liam, all hard planes and a heavy cock between his legs, lowers himself to the floor. He lies down next to us, his eyes moving between me to Rome. They’re having a private conversation while he fucks me.

Rome nods. Liam’s scar glistens, as do his eyes. He looks evil, as if he’s about to do something really bad. To cause damage.

“The belt on your ass will feel like nothing.” One hand on my hips, and he rips me away from Rome, hugging me to his chest.

Our eyes connect, and oh, how I love him. He also scares me to death. That doesn’t stop me from stroking his scar. From putting my lips to it. Licking it. I kiss every inch of Liam’s mangled skin. This isn’t me, trying to show him that he doesn’t disgust me.

I’m sucking on him because I can’t stop. Because it’s a beautiful part of him.

And I love him.

The man who holds me like he wants to hurt me lets out rough, manly moans. His cock jerks between us, and he puts a hand to the back of my neck, pulling me closer. My tongue explores more of him, and I’m moaning with him. The feel of him is addictive.

I’m obsessed.

He breathes hard, lowering us to the floor, positioning me on top of him.

Rome is behind me again, rubbing my ass, my hips, my waist.

Liam yanks me by the hair, forcing me up to look at him. “What we’re going to do will hurt that much more than the belt.”

I blink. Clench my ass. That’s where it hurts the most, right? I’m not used to their size in my pussy, and it’s that much more painful when they take my ass. Especially since there’s no lube in sight.

“Relax.” Rome runs his thumb on my tight hole. “I won’t touch your precious ass tonight.”

Damien, who’s been relatively quiet, descends to the floor. I gaze up at his sapphire eyes, at his mussed brown hair. Then he takes himself out and

his cock is in my face, hard and veiny and perfect. I open my mouth, begging for him. He's that beautiful. That hot.

"They're taking your cunt." He denies me of himself, shoving three fingers into my gaped mouth instead. His smirk is the cruelest it's ever been. "Both of them." In and out his fingers go, silencing my choked *no*s. "They'll stretch you so pretty. Make your pussy weep. Put babies inside you."

Damien isn't jealous. He's possessive and territorial even when they share me.

A sharp pain cuts through my lust haze. Liam's teeth are on my breast, nipping, biting. His hands are on my hips, lowering me over his hard cock. Impaling me on his length.

"Ah, fuck, you have such a hot cunt, baby." He drags me over his length. Taking my breath away. "So tight. We'll have so much fun hurting you. Make you take us like that"—*thrust*—"like you're a fuck doll. Like you're ours."

"You're getting my cock last, darling." Damien's gaze flickers from me to Rome. "I love your teeth on me. But you might bite my dick off when Rome goes all the way in. When he and Liam stretch you so wide, you can't see straight. And I can't have that. See, I'm very much addicted to fucking you with it."

Rome chooses that moment to add two fingers inside my pussy. Liam groans, the sound low, like he's trying to hide it. His hands on my hips push me harder on him, rubbing my clit on his abdomen.

I tear myself from Damien, watching Liam gritting his teeth.

"It's okay to like that," I whisper between moans. "Having Rome's fingers on you."

Honestly, I wouldn't mind if they loved each other that way. There's nothing more natural than that. Than love. Rome doesn't take out his fingers. He probably doesn't care, either. That's how much he loves friend.

"Of course it's okay." Liam's face remains stony. Everything about him is, except his eyes. Except his fingers on my face. "But it's not like that. I—*fuck*, the pressure. Can't you feel it?"

When Rome pulls out, I gasp. The sting from having him there has turned into pleasure, and now I miss him there. So bad.

"I did. When he was there."

Slap.

“Brat.” Rome’s palm lands on me a second time, connecting to the wounded parts of me. Where I’m sore from the belt. “Did we say you’re allowed to complain?”

On the third time, I howl in pain. “No, I—”

“I nothing.” Damien’s there to tug on my hair. “You’ll behave, Quinlan. Because you know us. You. Know. Us. We’re not nice. We’re not gentle. But we will be there for you. Every”—Liam punctuates each of Damien’s words by thrusting up, going deeper—“single”—Rome spanks me with the back of his hand, his rough knuckles scraping my wounded skin—“time.”

I cry out. I scream. I’m wet and close. I’m being held down by three men who own me. Who are willing to give me everything.

They’re insane. They’re exactly what I’ve needed all these years.

When the pain Rome administered subsides and his hand is stroking instead of destroying me, my vision clears.

The head of Damien’s cock is on my lips. There’s not a part of me that isn’t burning for him. For them.

He smears his arousal on my lips. On the skin around my mouth.

Liam is being ruthless when he moves his hands to my hips, fucking me harder. I hear Rome spitting, and since it doesn’t land on me, I assume it’s his palm. I’m so hot. Inferno levels hot.

My lips part, and I’m groaning with relief when Damien shoves himself into my mouth. My tongue swirls around the tip, claiming the salty taste of him for myself. It can’t be helped more than I can’t stop breathing.

“You’re beautiful when you’re desperate.” Damien pulls out, flicking his gaze behind me. “Want me to tell you what Rome’s doing?”

“Please.”

Liam’s cock pounds deep into me. His thrusts are slow, but that doesn’t make him any less aggressive. He fucks me like he hates me. That’s how much he loves me.

“Tell me.”

“He’s stroking his cock.” The bright sapphire in Damien’s eyes darkens. “Getting it wet for you. Wasted effort.”

Rome makes a choked sound that I’m too high to understand. He nudges himself to me and Liam stops moving us, his hands firm on my shaking body.

Damien’s attention is back on my face. “They’re going to rip you in half, wet or not.”

Rome groans, louder now. Pushes an inch of himself into me.

“That’s a good girl.” Liam helps him, moving me on top of him. Changing the angle so another inch of Rome slips in.

“No, no. I didn’t mean it before. I get it now.” My speech is frantic, my eyes darting low, searching for Liam. Damien won’t save me from this pain. From this intense pleasure that reaches behind my eyes. “You’re huge. Both of you. Please. More lube. Or another—” My lungs empty when Rome sinks farther inside. “Another day.”

Damien tips my head up. “No can do.”

“You’re having us.” Rome runs a hand over the curve of my ass. While he does, he pulls out, only a little. Tricking me into believing he’s about to offer me relief.

He doesn’t. He rolls his hips, sliding deeper into her. “Fuck. I don’t think I can stop.”

“He won’t.” Liam starts rocking me on him, treating me like a doll. A really, truly loved doll. “Neither of us will.”

“Don’t worry, darling.” Damien’s wink is no less wicked than his smirk. “They’ll make it fit.”

“Relax for me.” Rome’s not asking. He’s ordering. “Liam and I are going to fuck you together. It’s happening. Oh, *fuck*, you feel good. Our good girl.” He’s so big that I’m not sure how much more of him I can take. “Let me in. Let me use your sweet little cunt, Quinlan.”

“Deep breath.” Damien’s watching Rome. “He’s done waiting.”

Rome slams all the way inside me. No amount of breathing could’ve prepared me for this. My vision blurs at the edges as my body tries to accommodate him and Liam.

They aren’t giving me time to adjust to their girths, though. As soon as Rome is balls deep inside me, both of them start pounding into me.

They groan together, moving me and themselves in a rhythm that shouldn’t make sense, except it does. They know my body better than I do. Know my heart better than I do.

And in their merciless, agonizing thrusts, they hit every pleasure spot. The sparks of pain become a relief, and then yes, yes, yes, it’s pleasure.

Their strokes are brutal as they stretch me, and I’m grateful. So fucking grateful to be theirs.

They take and take, and I’m being used. I love being used.

By them.

“My turn.” Damien’s fingers pry my mouth open wider. He’s glaring at me, and I see it. That loss of control. A surge of pride lights me from the inside out. I made him this way. He’s mine. “You’re going to be a good little slut for me. A hole to use. You’ll let me fuck your mouth however I want.”

My consent isn’t needed. He himself said he’s not a nice guy.

But he’s asking for it anyway. In a fucked-up, Damien fashion.

I wouldn’t have him any other way.

I’m shaking and moaning and Rome’s rubbing my clit so good that I almost black out. I’m still coherent, just the right amount to blink and breathe out a “yes” for Damien.

I barely get the word out and he’s in. Damien’s hand wraps around the back of my head and he jerks his hips forward. Hits the back of my throat. Groans in pleasure while I choke on his length.

“Oh, fuck yes.” He holds me there, as much as the other men allow. Dragging his cock in and out of me. His pace is quick and punishing. There’s no reprieve in it. I don’t need a reprieve. Not from them.

“Look at those pretty lips wrapped around my dick. Suck me, Quinlan. Make it good. Yeah, just like that. With your tongue. Oh, Christ. Oh, fuck. Keep going. You’re doing so well.”

“Make her come.” I hear Liam, his voice strong. Possessive. Only it’s not me he’s talking to. It’s Rome who has his fingers on my clit. Who rubs me, forcing pleasure into me. “Need this perfect cunt to milk me. Need you tight and begging. I’ll fill you up when you come, Quinlan. Going to fuck babies into you.”

Liam’s dirty talk. The impossible stretch of my pussy. Damien debasing and owning my mouth.

My body can’t take another second of it. I lose control, a bright light bursting inside me. The entire room is being lit by it. The entire world. The universe.

I’m loud and breathless as I come. I’m shaking, floating, and I’ve never been more grounded.

“Such a good girl, little flame,” Liam groans, shoving me onto him as he spills inside me.

“*Fuuuck*.” Rome keeps thrusting into me as he shoots his load inside me, and there’s so much of both of him and Liam that they’re dripping out of me and down my thighs. “Take it, sweetheart. God. Fuck. Take every drop.”

“Eyes closed,” Damien grits out, tugging on my hair. “I’m going to finish on your pretty eyes. Claim every inch of your beautiful face. Make a mess of it. Be a good girl. Close. Your. Eyes.”

Damien’s not messing around. He doesn’t deliver idle threats, either. I’m aware of that by now. So I do what he says. I close my eyes.

“Dirty girl.” Damien’s hiss comes out while he’s spraying his hot cum on my eyes, my cheeks, my mouth.

While Rome is shoving his and Liam’s semen deep into my pussy. While Liam rises to suck and nip on my nipples, his mouth prolonging my orgasm.

“Our dirty girl.” Damien’s lips are on me, and he’s kissing me with his cum on my mouth. “I fucking love you.”

“So much,” Liam says, helping me to my back.

“And now you’re never going to forget it.” Rome presses a kiss to my clit that makes me gasp.

One of them is carrying me to bed. A minute or an hour later—I’m so high time doesn’t mean anything, not really—someone wipes a warm washcloth to clean my face. Another one cleans my thighs, my pussy, down my ass.

I open my eyes when they’re done, gazing at the three men in my bed.

“I love you.” I had to say it. Couldn’t allow myself to drift off without it.

I love them. I do.

Even more so, I’m theirs. I’m this woman who accepts love and relents control. A woman who would tear down the world for the men who captured her. Who are turning her into a butterfly.

Whoever hurt them better watch out.

These men aren’t alone anymore.

They have me. And I’ll help.

There’s nothing I won’t do for them. Nothing at all.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Quinlan

SUN RISES IN THE sky. Bright light shines on the empty penthouse in the morning, all the way through noon.

I'm sitting on a stool on the kitchen island, with the meal that Rome left for me this morning in front of me. He prepared it before any of us woke up today. When I came down here at six, he'd already been here. Stirring and stoic.

And I can't bring myself to eat the beef ragu and pasta he made.

The food is exquisite. The pasta is handmade and the ragu has been left for hours on the stove to simmer. The flavors are rich, the meat the most delicious I've ever had.

The food isn't the problem.

Yesterday, Rome promised me honesty.

He's given me so much since. All three of them. Morning sex. Three sets of hands soaping me, lathering shampoo into my hair, drying me up with plush, incredibly soft towels.

Liam brushed my hair, careful and attentive as he undid the knots. Rome blow-dried it.

Damien chose my clothes for me. Black lace bra and panties under black long-sleeve T-shirt and dark blue jeans. He laughed when I teased him about *letting* me have virtual conferences today. His laugh was an easy one. I could imagine a younger Damien at that moment. Before…

Before Rex.

I release a sigh into the empty penthouse. Collect meat, pasta and tomato sauce on my fork and shovel it into my mouth. Flavors explode on my tongue. My heart is so heavy that I don't enjoy it as much as I should. I can't.

"You have until five to be done with work." Damien's words come back to me as I chew. Swallow. Gulp on water, because the food won't go down my throat. *"We'll be back by then. Rome will be there to talk to you."*

There's no way I can finish this meal. This half-empty plate. There's no way I can do anything for the next seven hours other than stare. I haven't scheduled anything, of course I haven't.

I'm too on edge.

The only email I returned was Paulina's. She's one of my favorite clients, and I couldn't leave the message unopened. She asked when I'm back to taking new clients. Her friend opened a new exclusive club, and he deserves the best, Paulina said. After I replied with "It's still undecided," I shut down the laptop.

As I stare into my plate, I think, no, I don't want to stay here and do nothing. I want to run up to my room, push through the door, and talk to the little camera on my laptop. Maybe they'll be there. Maybe they'll listen to me when I yell at them that being alone with the pain and concerns about Rome and Damien is too painful. That I can't help if they don't talk to me like they promised.

"I'm sorry, Rome," I say to the food as I dispose of what's left of it. "I hope there aren't any cameras here and that you're not mad."

"Oh, but I am."

His booming voice catches me completely off guard. I scream and lose the grip on the plate and fork at the same time, and they fly out of my hands. They clatter on the floor, the white ceramic plate too delicate to absorb the fall. It crashes, breaking into so many pieces.

So many.

"Quinlan," Rome commands, speaking in a low tone.

"I'm sorry," I curse under my breath.

Is he disappointed that I didn't finish my meal, or that I dropped the plate? That I messed up their kitchen? That the food he worked so hard on is scattered all over the floor?

Whatever it is, I can’t leave it like this. I have to clean this up so that at least when he walks over here, the evidence of just how much I didn’t eat will be gone.

Where are the cleaning supplies? I have no idea.

Probably in the cupboards below the sink. I’ll start searching there.

One foot lifts. I’m about to step back when I hear a cracking sound. Ceramic splintering beneath a man’s dress shoes.

I turn toward Rome, my foot still up in the air, my arms spread to the side for balance.

Pleading with him to stay back won’t happen today. What does leave my body is my air and dignity when Rome swoops me into his arms.

“Sweetheart.” Dark blue eyes are as hard as the muscles of his chest, of his abs. He pins me to him, and my legs go automatically around his waist. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I thought I needed to clean this up.” Even though I frown, my arms go around Rome’s neck, right over his charcoal suit jacket. My fingers lace at his nape, though it does nothing to soften his expression. “I dropped the plate.”

“You needed to clean,” he huffs, his tone incredulous. “Barefoot.”

“Well, yes.” My heart beats to reach Rome. To jump into his broad chest and unite with his. He’s so sexy when he’s being protective like this. “I… I didn’t eat much, Rome. I’m so sorry. After yesterday, you said we’d talk. I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

He gives me a noncommittal huff, hugging me closer to him.

Rome isn’t mad. I could try making him laugh. “I would’ve plucked out the splinters and bandaged my feet later. I wouldn’t have died, you know.”

“You would’ve damaged my property, that’s what you would’ve done.” The storm clears behind his blue eyes. “Our property.”

“I’m not anyone’s property.”

“It hurts you, doesn’t it?”

“What does?”

“How much you want it. How it turns you on.” Rome places me on the counter, pushes my thighs apart. His hands are on my thighs and his face and mine are an inch apart. Less than that. “We can play this game for days. Weeks. Months. *Years*. Won’t change the simple truth that you’re our property.”

“No.” My chest rises and falls, the tension in the kitchen palpable. I’m not scared of him, but he’s early and he’s sort of smiling with his eyes and I want to play with him.

“Yes.”

My nostrils flare, much like Rome’s. In less than a second, this game has taken on a dark turn. The air crackles between us, and I feel like I’m standing in the eye of a hurricane. His hands slide up my body, landing at the sides of my neck. Dragging me to him.

“No.”

“Yes.” His lips brush against mine, electricity flowing through him. “Trust me, Damien and Liam would be just as disappointed to hear you’re being careless with what’s ours.”

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I breathe the air Rome gives me. Breathes into me. Otherwise, I would choke.

He doesn’t get to be this hot when he talks to me as if I’m a chair or a picture they’ve acquired. But he does. Oh, he does.

“The plate is your property too,” I whisper.

“Fuck the plate.” The word *fuck* on his tongue is the dirtiest I’ve ever heard. “Let’s start over. I’m home early from the office. What’s the right way to greet me?”

Going down on my knees for him. Undoing his belt, pulling down his zipper. Taking him out and sucking his gorgeous cock until he empties himself inside me.

“So dirty.” I’m an open book to him. He sees my filthy desires as if I’d articulated them for him. “Another day. When your feet won’t bleed when I bend you over this island and fuck you raw. Try again.”

“Honey.” My fingers go to the front of his shirt, clutching it. Crumpling the expensive fabric. “How was your day?”

“Close,” he growls.

Our foreheads press against each other. “Tell me.”

“Start with telling me how much you’ve missed me.”

“I’ve missed you.” Easiest thing I’ve done in my life. Telling the truth is always easy. “So much.”

“Good girl.” His fingers squeeze, choke, possess me. “I’ve really missed you too, sweetheart. It’s too fucking good to come back home to you.”

I would levitate, float in the air, go high up in the sky, never to return if not for Rome grounding me. If not for this harsh, scowling man who yanks

my mouth to his. He's crushing me, kissing me. Obliterating me through this impossibly painful and mind-numbing kiss.

It's much better than any food he's ever made. I'll never tell him that, though. This one I'm taking with me to the grave.

"Stay here." Rome's gaze darkens, pinning me in place.

He removes his jacket, places it on the kitchen island next to me and rolls the sleeves of his white dress shirt up. I'm drawn to the veins cording his muscular forearms. To the way his shirt moves with him.

When he catches me staring, he winks.

Rome, being playful. I could get used to that.

"So… Not that I'm complaining..." I watch him retrieving a dustpan from under the sink, close to where I guessed it'd be. "How come you're home early?"

His expression clouds, but he catches it fast, flashing me a soft smile.

"Sure you're not complaining?" Rome turns to the floor. He grabs the fork, tossing it in the sink. Next, he swipes the broken pieces of the plate into the dustpan. Cleaning the mess I've made.

"Over this? You here, and bent over?" I tease him, dangling my feet. "Never."

"What are you complaining about, Quinlan?" Rome empties the dustpan into the trash, the ceramic clinking as they land at the bottom. "That Liam and Damien aren't here?"

There's not a hint of jealousy in his tone. Rome sounds genuinely curious.

"No. I figured they're busy planning world domination." He stands up, and I poke his hip with my toe. Rome snatches my foot, biting my ankle. He turns around after I've squealed enough. "The four of us will have time together. I miss them, but I love that you're here. Like I said, I'm not complaining."

For the longest second, Rome stands there. He's studying me, assessing me.

Eventually, his expression settles. He's decided I was telling the truth. "We will. We'll have all the time."

He reaches into another cupboard, his shirt stretching over wide shoulders.

Hot.

These three men have the rare ability to be hot even when they're doing something as mundane as retrieving wipes.

"Changed my mind." The kitchen floor is sparkling in no time, and Rome turns to me. "I am complaining."

"About?"

The obvious thing would be to say that he was supposed to talk to me. That he doesn't look like he's going to go through with it.

I'm done pushing him, though. He's here in the middle of the day and it's fucking perfect.

"That you're there by the trash can." I spread my legs wide, ignoring the fact that he has his back turned to me. He'll turn back soon enough. "And not here."

Rome looks over his shoulder. The storm behind his eyes isn't one that'll end up with me dead. I thought he could kill me when I just got here. I don't anymore. I know it's a look of a man who's barely restraining himself.

A man who's more than ready to fuck me on every available surface in this penthouse.

Instead of doing exactly that, he shakes his head. His molars gnash.

"Rome?"

He turns around fully, walking up to me. Though he's hard, his cock standing proudly in his pants, Rome doesn't kiss me. Doesn't touch me where I'm aching for him.

"As much as it pains me, I'm not here early to fuck you. There's something else I have to do." One of his hands grabs me by the hips, pulling me toward him. The bruised knuckles of his free hand stroke the side of my face, and I lean into his touch. "If I remember correctly, I made you a promise."

This is it. It's big. Huge. Scary. Dread lines the pit of my stomach, and my hands on the island are clammy.

After this, there'll be no more secrets between Rome and me. He'll give me the keys to a part of himself I suspect only Damien and Liam are familiar with. And Anne, his sister, but that's a given.

I'm looking forward to it. Have him lend me some of his pain. Tell me who we need to fuck up.

That's what love is all about.

Rome stares at me, a thunderstorm in his eyes. Sheer honesty bleeds from him.

Rome and his pain.

“I’m listening.” I twist my head, kissing his rugged knuckles.

“Stay here,” he repeats the order. Turns around and disappears up the stairs.

Leaves me with my heart pounding and my mind whirring.

I try not to think of the worst. I really do. Invisible knives push into my collarbone, slicing me down the middle anyway.

He’s back in the kitchen after a few minutes, changed out of his office clothes. Rome exudes just as much power wearing snug black T-shirts and joggers. Silent as he places white hand wraps, red boxing gloves and a pair of my black leggings next to me. The socks and sneakers he’s brought for me are left on the clean floor.

I’m as quiet as he is. This isn’t a fun boxing session we’re going to have today. Nothing about what happens next could be qualified as fun.

“Hands,” he commands, already cupping my right one.

Rome’s methodic as he slips the thumb loop in place and starts wrapping the elastic over the back of my hand. His movements hypnotize me. I’m drawn to them, to how careful he’s being as he crosses the hand wrap over my wrist, my knuckles, my palm.

He’s not done, yet he pauses. Smooths his thumbs over my partly wrapped palm. “Wiggle your fingers.”

The movement of my fingers satisfies him. He still asks, “How does it feel?”

“Why don’t you put them on too?” I didn’t need to see him the other day to figure it out. I place my left palm on top of his bruised knuckles, stroking him.

“I like the pain. It takes off the edge.” His intense gaze almost knocks me over. “That, and my fists are all I’ll use when I kill my parents.”

The weight of what he’s telling me doesn’t sink in slowly. It’s a blow to the chest. To the gut. I wish—fuck, how I wish—I could’ve gone back in time. Throttle these assholes myself.

My mouth remains clamped shut. Rome, much like Damien, Liam and me, hates pity. I don’t pity him. I’m murderous.

And I’m quiet.

Rome nods once before he continues to wrap my hand, finishing it off with the Velcro. Other hand.

“Hold on to my shoulders.” My obedience is immediate, and with his palms on my hips, Rome lowers me to the floor.

“Damien’s going to be pissed that you’re changing me out of my clothes.” I smile at Rome as he pulls my jeans down my legs.

At that, Rome’s eyes warm by a fraction. “I’m sure he’d agree you’d be more comfortable boxing in leggings.”

“He’s kind of volatile.” I step out of my jeans, running my fingers over Rome’s neck. Coaxing a low hum out of him. “I can never tell with him.”

Despite the humor in my tone, it’s clear that we aren’t discussing my outfit anymore.

Rome’s expression sobers. Even when he’s on his knees, helping me into the leggings, he’s strong. Incredibly so.

“He loves you.” Rome slides my leggings up, one leg at a time. “Don’t ever doubt that. You don’t have to fear he’ll ever stop. He won’t.”

My mouth goes dry. It was easy to accept Liam’s love. As closed off as he might be, he bared his soul to me. He was the first to do it.

Rome’s vulnerabilities have been out there for me to see since day one. He’s short-tempered. He was probably starved as a kid, the way he’s obsessed with feeding me. He’s also protective to a fault.

Damien is an enigma. He’s obsessed as the other two men are, but he’s holding out on me. I’ve seen so much of him, and still, something’s missing. Not for long. He wants to show me. I just know it.

I lick my lips. “I love him too.”

“He makes it impossible not to. But only his people love both sides of him.”

As mysterious as Damien is, there’s nothing about him that I don’t love. I get what Rome’s saying.

He rises, places a hand at the small of my back and grabs the boxing gloves off the kitchen island. “Come on, let’s go.”

Rome releases me at the door. Only he, Damien, Liam, Anne and the building management have keys to it. That’s how the grocery shipments come in while the men are at the office, as Liam told me the other day.

We arrive at the gym, and the first thing I notice is how empty it is. It’s early in the day, but still—no one?

“Where’s everyone?”

“Where they should be. The fuck out of here.”

“How?”

“I talked to the building’s supervisor this morning. Told him to kick everyone out and close the gym for us.” My eyes and gaped mouth must betray my shock, because Rome pins me with a meaningful look and adds, “Money solves just about anything, pretty girl.”

The rest of the sentence, the part he leaves out, hangs in the air between us. Money makes a special kind of problem disappear. Money is how some murders go unsolved.

“Okay.” In one word, I tell him I understand. That I support him.

I offer him my hands, my skin tingling as he slips the boxing gloves onto them. He kisses my forehead when they’re firmly in place and guides me past the treadmills, elliptical trainers, weights.

And stop at the three punching bags hanging from the ceiling. Three leather benches line the walls. Strong, unforgiving fluorescent lights illuminate the space.

The third punching bag with the PRIVATE sign bolted to the chain belongs to him. I remember it from the last time I was here.

It belongs to Rome.

I belong to Rome too.

His large, calloused hands run over the leather, his dark eyes examining every inch carefully. Probably checking for blood stains.

Definitely checking for blood stains.

“Good,” he says to himself, walks up to me and holds my gloved hands. “This is your first out of many boxing lessons. I’m committed to coaching you, then practicing with you, and I won’t stop. You’re strong up here.” He taps my forehead. “And here.” The spot over my heart. “But I need you to be physically strong. Unbeatable. Not because we’re leaving you—don’t even go there, sweetheart. Whoever will try to hurt you will have to go through us first. Just in case we’re not there, for whatever fucking reason, you’ll have yourself.”

My eyes light up. A smile curls my lips up, despite the horrors that stand on the tip of Rome’s tongue. He’s giving me the biggest gift he can. Power. Confidence. Independence while still belonging.

“Thank you, Rome.” Gratitude spills out of me in waves. “Rex has never offered me anything remotely close to that. I was always the weak one. The guilty one. He even talked me out of the self-defense classes in college.” Heat prickles at my cheeks, at the half-lie I told Damien. Rome must have

heard about it from him. “Said it was a waste of money that would be better spent on my parents.”

“Rex is fucking done. And Quinlan, you haven’t been weak a day in your life. Look at you.” Rome slides up behind me, positions one of my feet forward, the other back. His hands run over my shoulders, arms and hands, lining them so my hands protect my face. “You aren’t even a real captive. We haven’t kidnapped you.”

His breath is hot on my cheek. He’s hard, sturdy and protective, pressed to my back. His body moves behind me, and I move with him.

“No. I chose to be here.” My arms bend at the elbows, punching the air slowly. He’s guiding me through the motions. “I could’ve said no.”

“That’s true.” My back twists, right elbow and knee bending. He’s doing all of that. “That’s a hook.”

“I did it to help my parents.”

I take a step forward, and Rome doesn’t stop me. We’re a unit, reaching the punching bag together. I throw a punch. A soft shock races through my arm and up my shoulder. The pain doesn’t register. The power surging through me is far stronger.

“You did.” His hand taps on my jaw lightly. “Teeth gritted. Chin tucked. That’s it, good girl.”

He reaches for my arms and hands, adjusting, correcting. Teaching me.

“Came here of my own free will.” Another right hook. The punching bag swings, barely.

“You did.” I feel Rome’s chest expanding at my back as he twists me to the other side. “I made sacrifices of my own free will, too. For my sister. Would’ve done it all over again if I had to. Would’ve done it for the rest of my goddamn life.”

He isn’t capable of saying it to my face. Not for the first time, at least. Being vulnerable is a struggle for him, as much as it was a struggle for me to open up about how lonely I’d been for years. How hurt I’d been. How I needed someone to care.

The jealousy from a few days ago is a distant memory. Rome isn’t just mine. He belongs to Liam and Damien and his sister, Anne.

I adore that about him, this fierce, unrelenting love. How he spreads it equally between his people.

Rome’s body is talking to me, and I listen. His heart beats against my back ribs. His silent instructions provide constant guidance. Together we

land one, two, three blows to the punching bag.

"Saying Joseph, my father"—*growl*—"is a bastard, would be underplaying what a monster he truly is." We switch legs a second time, right forward, left back. Rome nudges my feet inward, just the smallest angle, then squeezes my right bicep. "What I'm showing you now is called a jab. You're right-handed, so that's where you'll start."

There's no rushing Rome. I follow his lead, readying my body and my heart.

"A jab." When I nod, the stubble hair on Rome's cheek scrapes my cheek. He twists his head, pressing a soft kiss to my tattoo, and that's it.

That's all I could ever need.

"Yes. Right hand up to protect your chin. Always protect your face. That's a good girl, sweetheart. Lean into the power in your hips and shoulders. Land that punch." Once my gloved hand connects to the punching bag, Rome continues, "He's sadistic. Abusive. He just is, for no reason whatsoever."

"Some people are born monsters." The anger doesn't rise slowly. It's erupting from deep within me. I'm so mad, I go at the punching bag myself.

Twice. I feel the small shocks and welcome the pain. Anything is better than the burning ache in my chest.

That's what Rome meant when he said the pain on the outside helps. It's a distraction.

"They are. My…*mother*, Elaine. She'd been enabling him for years." Rome twists my upper body again, tugs my left arm close, pushing the right arm forward. "She let him lock food away. Never snuck not a single fucking breadcrumb when Anne and I had been starving. When Anne and I scratched at her walls and ate that because our bodies were so starved for calcium. Sometimes he made us throw up our food."

A light sheen of sweat forms on my forehead. My heart beats at a manic, furious pace.

This isn't the exercise doing that to me. It's what he's saying and all the things he doesn't. It's the images my mind conjures. The rage that fires through my muscles.

"Liam and Damien always brought extra food at school for me and Anne. Food I snuck in past my parents' staff. I couldn't bring her much, or they would've seen it hiding under the clothes I'd stuff at the bottom of my

backpack. Liam's parents had us over whenever my dad wouldn't lock us in the house. When they were home."

My forearms are slick. Rome isn't bothered by it, doesn't lose his grip on me as he guides my fists into the leather.

"School breaks were the worst. Joseph would either allow us out of the penthouse or not. He'd lock Anne and me in our separate bedrooms for hours, or not. A toss of a coin, that's what it'd been like."

Sweat pours down my cheeks, my face wet. It's just sweat. I'm not crying. I'm not sobbing. I have no right to be this miserable. This hollow.

"I never asked him for food. Not a day in my fucking life." The punching bag swings, and I realize it's me doing it. Rome's at my back, but I'm doing all the work. "I asked Elaine. I begged her to help Anne. She was useless. Wouldn't go to the police with me, either. He has her wrapped around his little finger. She loves him. Still, I figured—"

Rome drags a long breath in. His fingers sink into my abdomen, his arms thrusting me into his chest. I stop moving. Stop breathing, I think. I'm here for Rome. I'm screaming inwardly, demanding he takes every piece of comfort I have to offer him.

Let him have all of me.

I hope he hears. I think he does, because his grip on me tightens. His lips go to the crook of my neck.

This beautiful, strong man groans. The sound is tortured. Agonized. It reaches into my stomach and twists.

Good, I think. *Let me take it. Put it all on me.*

"I figured she loved her kids too. At least one of them. I didn't want her love. Gave up on it long before Anne was born. But Anne." Rome's palm burns me through my tank top. "Two days with nothing but water is a lifetime for a kid. She was so small. She's eight years younger than me, and just as fierce. I mean, look at her now."

Rome shakes his head, his laugh void of humor. Acrid.

"Look at her, what?" I whisper.

"She'd complain about her boss. About her work. Not once did she complain about being hungry." His thumb brushes my navel, soft. Every other muscle of his body is strained. "By the time she was old enough to realize I'm just as skinny as she was, she wouldn't accept food from me. She wouldn't take a bite until I took one in front of her."

“I hate them.” My lungs are full. I’m suffocating on pain. I shouldn’t be able to speak. Except it’s my rage that’s responsible for the words coming out of me. “I hate them, Rome.”

“That makes five of us.” He spins me toward him, ripping the gloves off my hands.

Taking my eyes off him is impossible. Rome stares down at my gloves while he tears at the Velcro, and I can’t stop looking at the face I’ve missed over the last few minutes.

The gloves are off and he snaps his head up, almost knocking me over with his intensity.

I stay right where I am. My muscles burn. Knees weak. Tremors coursing through me.

I do not move.

For him.

His hand rises to my sweaty, tear-streaked cheek, his thumb presses to my tattoo.

Dark, stormy eyes search mine. “No pity.”

“No pity.” I steel myself. Doesn’t take much to show him every ounce of hate I have in me.

“Good girl.” He leans in to kiss me, to bite me.

His hands are manacles around my neck. My arms link around his.

I’m furious. I’m murderous.

But until it’s time to act, there’s not much to do other than…

Kiss Rome back.

So I do.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Rome

"WHAT'S THIS KNIFE FOR, little flame?"

Quinlan's shoulders hunch up at Liam's voice.

Sure, he's turned sneaking and stalked into a form of art. Except he hasn't been watching Quinlan alone for the past three minutes. We have, together, arms crossed over our chests, spying on her every movement.

We didn't mean to, but when she slipped into the shower before our alarm went off, we were curious. Of course, the three of us woke up the moment she got out of bed. We're light sleepers and we feel her. And trust that her absence was felt.

We let her do her thing. Put on the white T-shirt and dark leggings we left out for her last night, then tiptoe her way out of the room and down the stairs.

Joseph and Elaine Langford were the last thing on my mind when Liam, Damien and I got up and hit the showers. They were supposed to be there, front and center, since I was about to kill them and all.

Quinlan. Sneaky Quinlan. Thoughts of her took center stage in my head. In my heart.

In a matter of minutes, the three of us were clean, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. BLF Capital's offices were closed for the day, and we had a couple of hours to kill before the story about Joseph Langford's corrupt ways would break.

And now we’re here, where we’ve been for the past five minutes. Studying this exquisite creator that’s consumed by the six chef’s knives that sit in their knife block.

Quinlan has gripped each one and ran her thumb along the sharp edges, the tips, the points. They weren’t a kitchen tool in her head. They looked like murder weapons.

She swirled each of them around in the light, fisted the handle. It took immense effort to keep quiet when she raised her arm and sliced the blade through the air.

This woman.

After the fifth knife, she found the right one.

“You’ll do,” she whispered to the blade. The metal glinted in the early morning sun, telling her that yes, it’ll do.

Will do?

We’re about to have our answer.

Quinlan spins to us, leaning on the counter.

Without letting go of the knife.

“Just in case.” She’s beautiful. Breathtaking. Even that’s an understatement.

Objectively, she’s the most gorgeous woman to exist. Wild, sandy hair flowing down the front of her body. Her clothes hug her soft curves. Pink cheeks and full lips.

Perfect.

But it’s what shines from inside her that gets my cock hard. That taunting glimmer behind her gray eyes that makes me forget the world. In a little over an hour, my life will change irrevocably. And I don’t care.

With Quinlan here, I just want to be done with it.

On those days, weeks and months that I’d fantasized what today, this scenario has never come to mind.

Controlled. Poised. Bloodthirsty. Impatient. I’ve been so sure that’s all I have in me. All I have to offer the world.

Which I am. I’m also possessive, mesmerized, and hot when I absolutely shouldn’t be.

Anne will walk through the doors to our penthouse in a few hours to join us. Then we’re off to our old home.

I can’t afford this distraction.

Can’t ignore it, either.

Don’t want to.

“In case what, sweetheart?” I’m at her side, my hand curling around the wrist of the hand holding the knife, thumb pressing to her pulse point.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

It’s raging beneath my finger. Her pupils are huge.

Quinlan grips the knife tighter. Her knuckles are white with how much she’s clinging to it.

“Yes, darling.” Damien’s at her other side, twisting her so he’s behind her. He brushes her hair to the side, then his hands are at her waist, mouth pressed to her neck. Smiling. “Tell us, what would you need a knife for? In case what, exactly?”

Quinlan shivers when he bites her, but she collects herself and lifts her chin. Her gaze clashes with mine, and there she is. The fierce girl who kicked the punching bag’s ass yesterday. Who listened to me. Who demanded to commit murders for me.

“You might ask for my help.” Her shoulders are squared, as if we’re not cornering her.

When I raise an eyebrow, she adds, “Killing your parents. I wasn’t sure if you’d want to do it alone. I’d punch them”—Quinlan lifts a fist between us, flexing her bicep and being so fucking adorable—“but I’m a few lessons short. I can’t use my guns. Yet. Hence the knife.”

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

We were supposed to keep her as our captive. I’d been obsessed with her, sure. Couldn’t stop thinking about what it’d be like to have this woman here, making her ours.

But everything was supposed to be intense. Serious.

Laughing? I can’t be laughing. This is wrong.

It’s what I have.

And I fucking laugh. A warm, short laugh. A laugh that says I love this woman so goddamn much.

Damien’s laughing too, an easy laugh as he pins her to his chest.

Our homicidal woman.

Liam—who’s moved to close our half-circle of three—smiles. Huffs a laugh that takes me aback just as much as the sound of my own laugh.

Ridiculous, I know. Being happy because he’s happy.

Nothing to do about it.

“As hot as it is, the idea of you going all Kill Bill on my behalf…” I pry Quinlan’s fingers off the black handle. “You’re not killing anyone.”

She makes me work for it, I’ll give her that. Liam stands at her side, gripping her chin and tilting her face to him. Damien slides his hand beneath the waistband of her leggings, rubbing her clit.

“Cheaters,” our captive gasps. Her grip on the knife loosens, and I take it from her.

“We would never.” The knife clinks onto the counter. My lips go to Quinlan’s cheek, lingering there, then move her ear.

“You know what I meant.” Her indignant huff is adorable as fuck.

“As I was saying.” My breath on her has Quinlan’s soft skin prickling. Or maybe it’s Damien’s fingers doing that to her. Could be Liam sucking on her bottom lip. Or all three of us together. “You won’t need this knife. We won’t let you kill anyone. You don’t need that.”

“You won’t *let* me do anything.” Liam parts his lips, going in for a kiss. She’s quick to twist her head to me. “I *want* to do it.”

I’m harder in my jeans than I was a second ago, my mouth watering to taste her. Her confidence is addictive.

“I want—*Damien*!”

“What?” He rubs her clit faster, her tight leggings posing no obstacle for him. “I’m being good, listening to you.”

“You’re being an asshole,” she groans. Straightens her spine and strokes my cheek. Fuck, she’s gentle. “I want to be there for you. Kill them with you.” *Gasp*. “I’ll be fine after that, promise. You don’t have to worry about me.”

For the past eighteen years, Quinlan has been a caged flower. And Rex stole the sun from her. He never cared for what she wanted out of life. Never took care of his dad. Never helped around with Quinlan’s mom.

But we do. We take care of her parents without her knowing.

We give her freedom, even when we lock her up here.

She could do anything. Say anything. And she chose to say this.

I want to be there for you. Kill them with you.

I pull back, taking her face in my palms. Damien, without me saying so, stops rubbing her.

“You’re serious,” I murmur. It’s the same tone I used when I realized Quinlan cried for me. When I was stunned to see that despite the tears, she didn’t pity me.

“I always am.”

“Anne will be here in a few hours.” Depending on what her boss will want to do with the news our reporter is leaking to Chicago’s marketing firms this very minute.

We told him to do that. Prepare the vultures to lure in Langford’s big accounts when the article airs on national TV. They’ll run from Joseph’s company before PR and damage control could convince them otherwise.

Joseph won’t be alive to witness his life’s work burning to the ground. But I will.

So yeah, Anne might be busy.

So will we.

Damien understands the underlying message in my words. He’s already hooking his fingers in the waistline of Quinlan’s leggings, shoving them down her legs. Her white panties go down with them.

“What?” Quinlan doesn’t resist, lifting her arms for me to whip her shirt off her body. “What are you doing?”

Her shirt flies to the floor. Damien’s palms trail up her waist, the sides of her breasts. Cupping her neck. Mine are on her ass, hauling her front to my aching cock.

“This isn’t the time for this,” she whispers, out of breath.

“It is.” Liam leans toward the counter, picking up the knife.

We turn her toward him. His free hand slips between Quinlan’s body and the fabric connecting her bra’s cups. One *snap*, and Quinlan’s matching white bra is torn out of the way.

“Your nipples are hard.” He skims the dull part of the blade on each one. “Are you that turned on? Killing Rome’s parents does that to you, little flame?”

I hate the fact that anyone would call them my parents, but I put that aside. Truth is, I hardly hear it. I hear her soft breaths. Her heart.

Quinlan, flushed and wide eyed, keeps staring at Liam as she reaches blindly for Damien and me. Her fingers clutch at our T-shirts, going lower to our zippers.

She doesn’t even have to ask. We take out our cocks for her. We wait for her.

“I wish I could kill every person who hurt you.” My fucking God. She arches her back when she says those dirty words come out of her mouth. Desperate for the knife Liam’s holding. The tip he’s tracing over the valley

between her breasts. “Helping you get your revenge. It would be right. It would be justice. And hot.”

“Filthy girl.” In a flash, Liam lowers his arm and slaps Quinlan’s pussy with the blade.

Quinlan’s scream is swallowed in my mouth, because fuck, I can’t take another second without kissing her. I yank her hand to my throbbing cock and I don’t. Stop. Kissing her.

“So filthy,” Damien hisses. In the corner of my eye, I see him sliding her hand along his length.

“Defiling you is such a pleasure, little flame.”

Quinlan half-moans, half-screams into my mouth. Her teeth clamp on my bottom lip, and her hand gives me the most delicious pleasure with the way she’s squeezing me. Stroking me.

My friends are doing something to her, and I need to see that. I break our kiss to look at her. At them.

“More pressure. That’s it.” Damien’s lips are on her neck, his fingers in her hair. He rocks his hips into her hand, sliding the wet tip onto her naked body. “Fuck my hand, darling. Let Liam hurt you. You’re doing so well.”

“She is.” Liam’s fingers are inside Quinlan’s pussy, moving in and out of her. Three of them, glistening with her arousal.

He glares at her, his gaze dark and somewhat unhinged as he presses the tip of the blade into the soft area right over her navel.

“Hold still for me.”

Damien slows his thrusts to a halt. I don’t dare move.

Liam’s intentions are clear. The angle he holds the knife leaves no room for doubt.

It doesn’t look like he’ll be able to stop, but he does, staring at Damien. Liam would never be dismissive when it comes to Dame’s and my traumas.

Damien nods, and Liam continues.

Any other man—any other person—who’d nick Quinlan’s skin would be long dead by now. Anyone who’d make her bleed would’ve had his head served on a motherfucking platter.

Liam isn’t any other man. He isn’t doing this to hurt her.

I check on Damien anyway. Sapphire eyes glint the moment our stares lock, and he offers me the subtlest nod. He’s fine. Better than fine, when he turns to the knife on Quinlan’s skin.

He’s mesmerized by the movement. By the first drops of blood as Liam breaks her skin. One stripe, two inches long.

She’s ours. Our bond is one that’ll last forever, with or without marking her. It doesn’t stop us from going after our most depraved needs to brand her as ours.

Today is the first in a chain of deadly events that are about to happen.

I guess it’s only appropriate to initiate it with blood. With this sick, twisted and hot ceremony.

With Liam’s fingers buried in her pussy while the knife carves into her body.

“Your pretty cunt loves us. Loves the pain.” Once Liam pulls the knife and his fingers away from her, he places the knife behind her on the counter. He grabs her by the hips, bending to run his tongue along the open cut. “You were soaked when I marked you.”

Quinlan tilts her head lower, watching Liam. Moaning for Liam, arching her body to him, she begs him to keep going.

“Fuck, you taste good. You took it like such a good girl.” Fire flickers in his eyes as he gazes up at her. As he sucks on her blood. “This isn’t over, though.” One last swipe of his tongue, and he’s up. “You’ll have three marks on you, little flame. One for each of us.”

“Please.” She nods, squeezing me. Rubbing me.

“Fuck,” he groans, hands on her cheeks. Pauses for the sweetest, longest second before his mouth slants over hers. Before he dips his tongue into her mouth, letting her taste her blood on him.

I’m not sure she’s aware her hands are moving on me and Damien. Neither of us stops her.

“You’re so good. You’re everything,” Liam groans between one desperate kiss and the other. “Hearing the things you’re willing to do for us. We’ll do more for you. So much more. We’ll gut people for you. Destroy anyone who hurts you. You’ve suffered enough, baby. Those days are over. You hear? You have us. You’ll always have us.”

“I have you,” she repeats.

Her fist is small and warm, and she fucks my cock just right, even dry. It’s a goddamn agony to pull away. But I see the look in Liam’s eyes. So does Damien.

“Going to fuck you.” Liam’s jeans come undone, his cock out while I haul Quinlan to the counter. While Damien pushes her legs apart. “Our

good girl.”

Liam’s fingers are still damp with her arousal. He smears what’s left of it on her cheeks, down her neck and I can’t help it. I lick it off her. I suck on it until I’m sure her taste won’t ever leave my mouth.

“For you. I’ll always be that person for you.” Quinlan spreads her attention between the three of us. Fierce and so needy that my sanity is quickly slipping away with how beautiful she is. “Dirty and good for you and murderous for the three of you. Always.”

We sound like animals. We touch and grope and pull on every part of her.

Then it’s Liam lining himself to her soaked cunt, his head throbbing and wet. His hands are firm on her hips, holding her hard enough to make Quinlan cry out. She grasps the sides of his neck, crying louder when he slams himself into her. All the way in.

“Liam, yes.” Every word is punctuated by each one of his punishing strokes. Her hands are on his neck, thumbs pressed to his jaw. Cheek. His scar. “Please. It hurts so good. Don’t stop. There. Yes. Please. Please. Please.”

He goes faster, merciless, drawing screams and pleas and tears out of Quinlan. Her gray eyes grow to black, endless pools. She pulls her to him, his forehead on hers. I can’t stop looking at them. Every part, every movement. I’m drawn. Turned on. I love them.

“Oh, fuck.” His eyes close as he’s fucking her harder.

I see it, how his biceps flex with the effort to keep her in place. Quinlan twists his face, her tongue and lips stroke and trace every inch of his scar.

“Oh, God. Oh, fuck, little flame.” His lips part, and I can tell he’s close. “I love you. How I fucking love you.”

She needs to come. Liam would want it, but he’s too lost in the pleasure he takes from her to notice. So I pinch her nipple, tugging on the hardened peak. Quinlan’s cries are addictive, and I draw more of those out of her as I fuck my fist at a safe distance from Liam.

Damien has stepped behind Liam’s back, his hand wrapped around Quinlan’s foot and he’s sucking on her ankle. Liam ruts into her, and Damien holds her foot in place, his eyes rolling, moaning as his fingers dig into her calf, his free hand stroking his length.

Liam takes her lips again, and he’s not gentle anymore. He’s the most brutal he’s ever been. No more hiding from Quinlan. No more lurking in the shadows. He’s being himself and Quinlan loves it.

She comes from how much she loves it. I don't have to feel her squeezing my cock to know her orgasm pulses through her beautiful body.

Liam's growl is such a base one. It reverberates from his chest.

"Every drop, little flame. Take it. Daddy needs this pretty cunt full." Liam thrusts, his hips hitting the edge of the counter as he empties himself inside her. "Our beautiful girl, taking every. Single. Drop."

Damien releases her. As soon as Liam draws out of Quinlan, he's there to take her.

"Fuck." He grabs her neck and waist, moving her with him. Leaning in to her lips. "You taste good everywhere, darling."

"I do?" she asks, her feet pinned to Damien's ass.

I watch her kiss him while I jerk off to the two of them fucking on the counter. He's being cruel, biting on her bottom lip as mercilessly as he does.

"Well." His thumb slides to her clit and rubs while Liam tucks himself in, perching his hip on the counter. "I haven't tasted your tightest hole. Yet."

"Damien." It's a moan and a gasp and fuck, that's hot.

"Quiet." He yanks on her hair, lowering her to the counter. Flattening her back on it. Towering over her. Slamming into her. "I'll do whatever I want. Take whatever I want from you. If I want to circle your rim with my tongue until you scream and cry and beg to be pounded there, guess what, darling?"

Her eyes look at him as if he hung the moon. "You'll do it."

"I will." Damien doesn't look anywhere except Quinlan's face when he's grasping for the knife.

Liam shoves the handle into his palm, and Damien puts the tip of the blade to her stomach. He slows his thrusts, carving and identical, parallel line to Liam's.

The knife slices through her soft belly, and she's being so sweet about it. Slapping her hands to the counter, she mumbles "yes" over and over again.

"I'll always be here." Damien puts his lips to the tip of the knife, sucking on her blood.

When it's clean, he throws it to the side, pressing his finger to her open wound.

At that, she screams.

At that he smirks at her, sucking on his bloodied finger. "Always. Say it."

"You'll always be here." Quinlan covers his hands that are on her hips now.

Her fingernails grasp on to him, but it doesn't help to keep her body from swaying on the counter. Not when Damien's driving into her as hard as he does.

His name on her lips is the start of her second orgasm. Her eyes shut as her teeth grind, and she whimpers, "It hurts. It hurts to come again."

"Eyes on me," he grits out. I can barely hear him with my cock begging to be inside her and my hand pumping myself. "Eyes on me when you come, Quinlan. When I'm putting babies inside you."

She's being good again. God, is she good, doing what he says, pinning her feet to his ass when she comes. Never taking her gaze off him. She comes harder when a string of curses comes from him, when he jerks his hips and spills himself inside her.

He picks Quinlan up, presses their foreheads together. His fingers thread into her hair and he breathes slowly, his expression serious. "I love you. I. Love. You."

"I love you too, Damien."

I'm patient until I'm not. My grip on her neck and thighs is a punishing, bruising one. I take her, or it's Damien handing her over to me. Anyway, she's mine now. I push two fingers into her pussy and *fuck*. Fuck, fuck, fuck. She's wet, her arousal mixed with Damien's and Liam's cum.

"You're sucking me in." I'm impatient. I'm ruthless. I'm on a goddamn mission to split Quinlan in half. "You have all this cum in you, but your pussy is still begging for more. Haven't they hurt you enough, sweetheart?"

"No. Rome, I need you." Quinlan offers herself to me and I bend for her. I'll fucking bend for her for the rest of my life. "I need you too."

I nip and suck and lick one nipple, moving to the other one once I'm satisfied I've administered enough pain. That I've turned her swollen breast red around Damien's bite marks.

"You're going to give me another orgasm, Quinlan." She's back there, splayed out on the counter. The knife is in my hand, I don't know who put it there. Don't care.

What I care about are her spread legs. Her swollen pussy.

One thrust and—fuck me. Fuck. It feels like home, being inside her. Wet and hot and *yes*.

"I can't." The terror in her voice is real and sexy as fuck.

"I'm not finishing unless you do." I pin her to the counter with a hand on her pussy, my thumb rubbing circles on her soaking clit. "I'll fuck you for

hours. Screw my revenge plan. Screw everything. I'm not coming without you."

Quinlan shakes her head, her thighs trembling. Her body will give me what I want, even if she thinks it's impossible. Nothing's impossible when we're the ones demanding it from her. Our little captive will give us everything.

"The only way I stop fucking this pussy is when you come."

She keeps saying no, and I let her. I slow my thrusts, pressing the tip next to Liam and Damien's line. Pushing through the resistance of her skin. Her body relents to me, the first drop of blood glistening on the metal. Quinlan moans and grinds her hips on the counter, as desperate as I am for that friction.

It'll end up hurting her. I won't have that.

"Don't move." My glare is enough to stop her.

"Please, Rome, I'll be good."

"Oh, now you want to come?" Damien strokes her hair.

I fix my attention on her stomach, on the red line I'm embedding into her flesh.

She grabs my wrist, her gray eyes wild. "Yes. Do it."

The cut I've made matches that of my friends. I do the same thing they have, swiping my tongue along the blade. Tasting her sweet, addictive blood, then discarding the knife.

"I love it when you're good." Carefully, I pull her upper body to me. I wrap an arm around her back and fucking her with everything I have. "I love you."

"I love—" She clenches around me, her body tight and ready to burst. "I love you back."

Every part of me fucks every part of her. My cock. My mouth. My soul. This is what I needed today. This connection. The taste of her blood and lips and tongue.

This is the best revenge I could ever hope to have.

Living. I fucking live.

"Rome." Her orgasm throws me right over the edge with her. I kiss her harder. I fill her up with so much cum it's trickling out of her, on my cock, on my balls.

We come down from the high, and I pull out, tucking myself in. Liam's next to me, a wet cloth in his hand. He dabs it over Quinlan's red, swollen

lips, her clit, but not before I shove our cum back in. As much as I can.

“Open wide.” While Liam cleans her and Damien cups her cheek, his thumb stroking her reverently.

She does, sticking her pretty tongue out for me. Sucks and licks my fingers that have our orgasms coating them.

“My turn.” Quinlan’s breathing hard when I remove my fingers from her.

“To fuck us?” Damien pulls her face to him, his eyebrow quirked. “It’ll be a first, but I’m up for it. Maybe later, though, after—”

She shakes her head as much as his grip allows, her soft hair moving with her. “Marking you.”

Not cutting you. Not hurting you.

Marking you.

The sound of it is possessive. It’s loving.

It’s derived from understanding. She’s choosing her words carefully, for Damien, if I had to guess. We kidnapped her, tortured her, cut her flawless skin and marked her, and she’s being careful with his heart. With ours.

Regardless, the idea of putting a knife to Damien’s skin…

Liam is done cleaning her, closes her legs, and moves aside. Both of us are visibly concerned. All of us are looking at him.

“I’d be honored.” Damien reaches for the knife, offering it to Quinlan. When she grips it, he releases her face, placing his right hand between them. His offer, verbal and physical, is a breath of fresh air. Damien’s lips twist into a smirk, and he points at his ring finger. “On the left one, we’ll have a real ring. Soon. But I need the second one marked by you.”

Quinlan sits there on the counter. Naked. Her neck is flushed. Her eyes glint.

Three red lines are on her stomach. They’re there to stay. She’s beautiful. And smiling.

She’s being gentle as she curls her fingers around Damien’s wrist and brings his hand toward her.

Damien rubs his free hand over her naked thigh, down her knee. He lets her know it’s okay. That he’s not triggered by the knife she puts to his skin. She leans in to his lips for a kiss, then goes on to cut the shape of a half wedding band on the base of his finger.

His blood trickles onto her thigh, but he’s relaxed. I can swear it’s the most relaxed I’ve seen him in years.

“Thank you.” His hands cover her cheek after she puts the knife aside. He kisses her forehead, sucking a breath, inhaling her. “Thank you.”

He starts moving out of the way. She catches him, wrapping her lips around his finger. The three of us don’t breathe, captivated by how she’s taking him in, sucking on his blood.

“Always here.” She flattens her palm on her heart. Damien covers hers, nods once and walks off to the first aid kit we have in one of the cupboards. It’s not urgent. But it’s a lot for him to be here with his feelings.

And it’s okay. We don’t call him out on it. We wait for him, the three of us.

“Come here, Liam.” Her lips are full and soft, and her smile is the bright light at the end of the tunnel I never thought I’d get to see.

He goes over there, never hesitating when he offers her his hand. Her warmth, attention and use of the knife bring my friend so much happiness and he can’t hide it. He smiles wide.

“Beautiful.” She kisses the bloodied band, swiping her tongue on him.

For a second, he groans, pushing her head down on him. Then he lets out a harsh breath, taking a step back.

“You’re beautiful.” The kiss to her forehead is the last one before he moves out of the way.

“Rome.” Tears line her eyes, her voice breaking near the end. “Would you like to—”

“Sweetheart.” I’m right there, in front of her, shoving my right hand between us. My left hand goes around her wrist, pinning the blade to my finger. “You’re asking all of a sudden?”

She gazes at me, her eyes like the sky after the storm. “I thought about it. Maybe you don’t want to do this today. It’s okay.”

“I do. I’m okay. Everything’s better with you here.” My lips press together, my heart hammering. “Everything. Including today.”

“But—”

“I’ll be very fucking offended if you don’t cut me. Right the fuck now.” I press the knife harder into my skin. “Is that what you’re doing here? Trying to hurt my feelings?”

“No.” Quinlan shakes her head, the slightest movement releasing one tear drop. It rolls down her cheek. “You’re so strong. You’re going to be amazing today. It’ll be okay.”

“It already is.” My teeth graze her plump bottom lip, tug and release. “Do it.”

The knife breaks my skin, and this pain is unlike any other I’ve ever felt. This pain reaches into my soul, and it doesn’t take off the edge. It carries me home. Once she starts, she doesn’t stop until she’s done.

Clink. The cut is complete. I’m aware my friends are here, and I don’t—can’t—care. I shove my finger into her mouth.

“So good, sucking my blood.” Damien and Liam stand next to us, and I keep praising her. “You’re so good, sweetheart. So perfect. That’s it.”

We take her upstairs after that, run a bath. Clean her.

Love her.

We’re hers and she’s ours.

Always.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Rome

TEN MINUTES AFTER WE were done bathing Quinlan and dressing her in a black shirt and a black pair of jeans, my phone lit up with a message from Anne.

Anne: *Morning, big brother. I was on my way until my boss called. Like you said. Everyone's talking.*

I smiled at the message while I was in the kitchen fixing breakfast with my finger bandaged. Aromas of pancakes, eggs and bacon filled the space while I worked.

Everything was going according to plan. For the time being, I suppressed my urge to tell Anne that this is her moment. The right time to kiss her asshole boss goodbye and start her own marketing company, at fucking last.

Later.

Because the news is on and I'm strangely casual about it. Quinlan sneaks glances at me while I shovel food into my mouth while the *BREAKING NEWS* ticker runs on the bottom of the screen. While Joseph's disgrace is out there for the world to see.

"Are you okay?" She finishes the food on the plate, and I know it's for me. I love her all the more for it.

"I'm ready," is my honest answer.

The reporter wraps up the story I handed over to him weeks ago with a, "Back to you, Ned."

Everyone’s done eating. And I…

I’m empty. I’m sitting here, waiting for Anne. For the shit to hit the fan and for Joseph and Elaine to feel what it’s like to have everything ripped from them.

I hate waiting.

My hands are balled into fists. The need to murder the two people who brought me into this world is as insistent as the beating of my heart.

“Hey.” Quinlan straddles me while I am lost inside my head. My friends aren’t here. The table has been cleared.

And she’s on top of me. Her jeans stretch on her thighs. Her lips graze my cheek, her arms are looped around my neck.

She’s found me. This beautiful angel, backlit by the morning sun filtering into our living room. Feather wings will spread from her shoulder blades any second now.

She might fly away.

Never.

“Hey, you.” My fingers no longer dig into my palms. I have a hand on Quinlan’s hip, the other brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear.

The news has been muted too. Quinlan leans in to kiss my lips, straightening before I can do more. Before I can get lost in the cleavage of her black tank top. “What time do we leave?”

“You’re right. I haven’t discussed that part of the plan with you.”

A phone rings, the sound coming from the kitchen. Whoever they are, they can fuck right off. I slither a hand around Quinlan’s throat, cutting off some of her air supply. Just a little. Just what I need to make her shift in my grip. To squirm.

“No.” Her bottom lip juts out. She’s comfortable around me. My brutality doesn’t scare her anymore. “Rude.”

“Let me amend that, then.” My thumb strokes a soothing path along her throat, and I tell her. Don’t leave anything out.

“That’s hot.” Quinlan’s fingers dig into my neck. She grinds her hips on my hardening cock, once, twice, three times.

She’ll be the end of me.

“Don’t,” I warn.

Her grin turns wicked. Her thighs squeeze around mine.

“Rome.” I twist my head at the sound of Liam’s voice.

He’s close to us, his phone in his hand. My first thought is that I missed one of Anne’s texts and she called him.

“My parents.” He lowers to the sofa next to Quinlan and me, puts the phone on speaker, and holds it up between us.

They used to live here, his parents. Now they live in the home Liam bought them in Miami. Far away from this mess so that they’d never be connected to this.

This is the first they called in two weeks. Liam asked them to wait until Quinlan has settled in, and she has.

“Oh, Rome.” Nancy’s, his mother’s, voice quivers. “This is it, honey. It’s finally happening.”

Quinlan’s whole expression changes. Her gaze shifts to Liam, wondering how much his parents know.

All of it. They’re okay with it too. His sharp nod tells her.

Liam’s parents are good people. The best out there. Damien, Anne and I had always been welcomed guests in their home. We were family. Day or night, their door was open for us.

But even people like them, especially like Liam’s dad, draw the line somewhere.

His father had to be talked down—not once, but dozens of times from murdering Aria. *We* did it. Three kids who’d promised him she’d pay for what she’d done to his son. Sooner or later, we’d get to her.

The assurances didn’t soothe him. It did, however, help him stay out of prison. By his wife’s and son’s side, where he belonged.

Damien saunters in, sitting by my other side.

“Yes, it is, Mr. and Mrs. F.” I’m as choked as Liam’s mom sounded. Damn it with these emotions. “Thank you. For calling. For waiting. We’re starting to set the record straight.”

“Of course, Rome. And for the love of God, Mr. and Mrs. F? You haven’t called us that since you were, what, eleven?” She chuckles. “Damien wasn’t half as formal when we talked to him just now. Am I missing something?”

I can see her as if she were right here in front of me. Amber eyes lighting up, black, curly hair rolling in waves down her shoulders. Liam got her looks. He’s still very much his dad’s son. He might not be slim or have his dad’s red hair and green eyes.

On the inside, though, they’re almost the same person. Somber. Serious. Never one to complain. Aria took advantage of that. When Liam had

withdrawn into himself during the months she'd tortured him, his parents thought nothing of it. They figured he was just being himself.

Granted, his parents have never shared that part with us. They haven't made excuses or tried to victim-blame their son. I overheard them one night when I slept over at Liam's. Heard them weeping, both of them. Cursing themselves.

"I'll never be formal with you, pretty Nancy." Damien wags his eyebrows.

This isn't a video call, my glower tells him. He wags them still. He wouldn't let them see him in pain, not ever.

"Well," I start, when I feel the weight on my chest isn't going to crush me.

It helps that Quinlan curls her body into me. That Liam's hand is on one shoulder and Damien slaps me over the back of the head. The bastard knows what to do to snap me out of it.

"Oooh, I see." Nancy giggles, sounding the youngest she has in years.

"Nance." Her husband's reproach isn't mad at all. He's never so much as upset with her. He worships the ground she walks on.

"Hush, Gerald." The silence means he's suppressing a smile. "What I was saying is, Rome is pretending to be polite because Quinlan's with them, right? Sweetie, are you there? How have they been treating you?"

Quinlan's cheeks are redder than the fresh cuts on her stomach. More than the bloody wedding bands on ours. Her eyes widen again, asking *again* whether Liam's parents knew about this.

The answer for that is again, a *yes*. They were the ones asking us to be nice, which we have been. Eventually.

Liam's palm slides to her cheek, turning her to him. "She's here."

"You have no idea how long we've been waiting to meet you." Another one of Nancy's friendly chuckles filters through the speakers. "And talk to you."

"Hi. Yes. I'm here. Everyone's been great." Quinlan stares at the phone, the corners of her lips tugging up. Her eyes grow misty. "I'm so happy to meet you too, Liam's parents."

"Nancy and Jerry, please." That's his dad, firm and warm at once. "From what the boys—"

"Men, Gerald," she chides, her love for him pouring through her voice.

My fingers dig deeper into Quinlan's hips. I hope—fucking *wish*—to have this kind of bond with her. All of us crave that. Forever. The kind of love that lasts.

"Men, right." He huffs a laugh. "We'd love to talk some more, but we have to leave for our shifts. Is Anne there? She's so busy with her job, we hardly get to talk to her anymore and I'd like to say hi to her too."

"She'll be here later, Dad." Liam pauses. "You don't have to go to work, you know."

Neither of them does. Liam's offered to pay for whatever they might need. He does that without their permission, sometimes.

Except this isn't about the money for them. "We've been through this. We have to *help*, son."

Liam shrugs. "When you feel like you've had enough—"

"You'll be the first to know," his mother chirps.

The front door to our penthouse opens.

"Bye, boys. Quinlan."

The line goes dead before either of us gets the chance to tell them Anne's here.

"I'm here. Wait, don't hang up," Anne calls out, running into the living room.

My sister ignores the loud silence. She's too amped up to stop her jog to the sofa on her high heels. Her flowy, black tunic shirt flails around her. Her long, light brown hair bounces behind her back.

Her blue eyes zoom in on the phone in Liam's hand, her full attention aimed at her target. When she's laser-focused on something, she blocks out the rest of the world. It was a game I taught her when we were young. A lame trick to get her to think of anything else, just not food.

It came in handy later in life. That's how she graduated early, landed a great position in a leading marketing company before she hit twenty-two.

She married a man who treats her like the queen she is for a whole other reason. Because she deserved the best, and Nick is it for her. The love of her life.

I taught her that too.

Quinlan pushes against my shoulders, trying to get off me while Anne's attention is elsewhere. The only reason I'm allowing her to slip into Damien's lap and then to the space he's put between us is that Anne is my fucking sister.

She shouldn’t see Quinlan riding me. Clothes on or not.

But it hurts letting her go.

“Hey, Anne.” Liam smiles at her. “They hung up. They’ll be back from their shift tomorrow morning.”

She’s too close already. Too focused to hear what he’s saying.

“Are they there?” Breathless, she snatches the device. Brings it to her ear and groans at the silence. “Almost. My fucking boss, I swear.”

“Anne.” My hand covers hers that’s resting on the back of the sofa.

“One sec.” She holds up a finger. “I’ll call them now, just to say hi.”

“Anne,” Damien says, his voice soft.

I squeeze her hand. Liam stares up at her.

And then there’s Quinlan. I glance over my shoulder, finding her head tipped up, eyes on Anne. Curious and affectionate.

“Password protected, ugh, of course.” Anne throws Liam’s phone on the end of the sofa. She pulls her phone out of her black leather bag.

“Anne, could that wait?” My voice is as soft as Damien’s.

“Has anyone told you you’re fucking impatient? I said I need one sec, and that means—”

“We have a guest.”

“A guest?” Her gaze cuts to me, then to the woman jammed between Damien and me.

“Hey.” Our little captive is sweet, not caring that she’s been ignored up until a moment ago.

It’s taken her a heartbeat to get what Anne’s like. To think it’s cute. There’s excitement in her voice.

Excitement for meeting my sister.

She’s up, rounding the sofa at record speed to stand next to Anne. “I’m Quinlan.”

“Fuck me sideways.” Anne slaps her forehead. “I’m so sorry, Q. Of course you are. Rome’s told me all about you. Couldn’t shut up about you, that guy. Are you done being a captive? Is this consensual already? I’m not taking their word for it.”

“Anne,” I chide, although, much like Liam’s mom when she talks to his dad, I’m not really mad. I love Anne. Love every part about her.

“She’s good.” Quinlan couldn’t care less, either. Her smile is huge, arms open to Anne, who hugs her back. “Yes, I’m a consenting captive, so I’m good too.”

“Sorry again. I was so excited when I heard Liam’s parents over the speaker.” Anne rubs Quinlan’s back as though they’re old friends.

The sight tugs at my heart. Liam and Damien are quiet too, absorbing the moment. For a few seconds, my muscles don’t strain. My brain isn’t set on murder and blood and pumping fists into noses.

For a few seconds, this is all I need. My people. My family.

Then Anne laughs, and I remember. The days she didn’t. The hours she cried quietly in her room. How she begged me to read her a million stories at night because she was starving and couldn’t fall asleep.

The suffering I’d gone through before she was born was nothing compared to when Anne came into the world. Her pain hurt me a million times more than mine ever did.

Focus. Look at her.

She looks healthy now. She looks *happy*.

“I’d come here personally. Tear you limb from limb if I find out your fridge is even half-empty, or that Anne hasn’t been eating. She’s yours, but she’ll always be my sister. Always be my blood. There isn’t a day I won’t look after her. You hear?”

Those were my words to Nick, her husband, on the morning of their wedding.

He heard. Nick’s a good guy. You can never be too careful, though.

“Again, I apologize.”

“Nothing to apologize for. I’m exactly the same.” Quinlan lets Anne hold her for as long as she’d like. “Try to distract me when I’m working. Never going to happen.”

Anne finally breaks the hug, and Quinlan jumps over the sofa, sinking in between Damien and me.

Anne sinks into the sofa across from ours. “What happened to your fingers? Some kind of freak accident in the kitchen?”

She’s talking about the bandages. About the marks Quinlan left on us.

“Something like that,” I quip.

“Okay, um, feels like something, um…private. Not my business. What is, is Elaine. Bitch called on the drive over here.” She eyes Quinlan as Damien hauls her by the hips to sit on his lap, her expression approving. “After eight years of conveniently forgetting I ever existed. Which, by the way, has been very fucking convenient for me as well.”

“And?” On any other day, I would’ve leaned forward. Would’ve demanded the information and demanded it *yesterday*. I’d be impatient. Hungry for the slightest whiff of these people’s despair.

Except Quinlan’s close, her body heat bleeding into mine. Her fury is just as hot. It’s a balm to my soul. I stay there, leaning back on the sofa.

“She’s such a baby, I swear.” Anne’s blue eyes roll to the back of her head. “*No one’s picking up the phone, Annie*.” She mimics her high-pitched, hysterical voice. Anything that gets between her and her social status does that to Elaine. “*You—you need to call them. Call someone. You need to help this family. Set the record straight. You know they’re lying. Your father never stole a dime in his life*.”

“You said no.” I suddenly realize my hand squeezes Quinlan’s. I won’t break her fingers, and she won’t wriggle out of my hold, so we’re good. I’m not letting go.

“Honestly? I got bored.” Anne’s manicured fingers tap restlessly on her legs. “I hung up on her.”

Choked laughter comes from all of us. If I’m not careful, I’m going to start getting used to this.

“What?” Anne shrugs when I stare at her, shaking my head. I’m so proud of how strong and resilient she is. How she didn’t let the call affect her. “We’re seeing them soon anyway. I wasn’t letting her ruin my mood. Not like it stopped *him* from trying.”

The room grows silent in an instant.

“Yup. He…” Four sets of eyes wait for Anne to finish the sentence. “Joseph texted me.”

“Fuck this guy.” Liam throws his arm over the back of the sofa, twirling a lock of Quinlan’s hair around his finger.

Her hair. Not the Zippo.

We have to get out of here, or I’ll start hugging everyone and, Jesus, this isn’t the day for it. No day is the day for *that*.

“The asshole begged for help?” Damien’s loathing for our parents is audible. Tangible.

Since I don’t give a damn about what was on Joseph’s message, I stay silent. Observing Anne for any sign of distress.

Nothing.

“What did he want?” Quinlan sits up, sliding to the place between Damien and me again. She’s bristling. “If he sounded pathetic, I’d love to

hear it. Please."

Anne's dark blue eyes that are so much like mine examine Quinlan. She cuts her gaze to me. "You should've kidnapped her sooner."

Something in my body screams. It's louder than the conversation in the room. It pushes me to my feet. Balls my hands into fists.

"That's what I keep saying." Damien's up right after me, offering Quinlan his hand.

"Why is it never *we should've asked her on a date sooner*?" Quinlan places her palm in his and stands up.

"Because"—I grab her arm, bringing her to me for a quick, much-needed embrace—"this was a part of the plan."

"Everything happens as it should," Liam adds, unfolding himself from the sofa.

A laugh bursts out of Anne, and she's shaking her head. She's been around us her entire life. Has been there for some of our best and worst moments. Nothing could shock her anymore.

"Well?" I let my sister walk ahead of us.

"He said he knew it was you, Rome."

Quinlan stays at my side. She senses the tension in the air. How volatile I've become at his accusation. At the fact that he mentioned my name.

The closer we get to the front door, the pressure in my head intensifies. The harder my fingers dig into my palm.

Quinlan senses it, and she's there, prying my fingers open, holding my hand. I grip hers, the skin of my hand stretching over my knuckles. I'm a storm, and Quinlan thrusts herself onto me, consequences be damned.

"What did you tell him?" The corner of Quinlan's lips curls into sneer.

She's dying to hear how my sister humiliated Joseph. How she stuck the knife deeper between his miserable ribs.

"I told him to go fuck himself." Anne steps outside into the hall, swiveling to us. "*Delete this number*. That was my second text."

Liam locks the door behind us. The soft *click* announces that this is it. I'm finally fucking doing it.

We're actually going through with it.

After so many years, the feeling is surreal. Except I have my friends around me. I have my sister. We have the girl. A fierce woman who's volunteered to help me kill my parents.

Her hand is on her belly while the others stand ahead of us, brushing her thumb over the bandaged scars we left there. Or maybe she's stroking something else.

Maybe…

Enough.

This isn't the time to wonder whether one of us put a baby inside her.

This is when I remember that skinny, helpless boy I used to be. The malnourished kid who couldn't protect himself, much less his baby sister.

I can now.

I can, and I will.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Rome

WE HAVE AN HOUR to be done with this. Less than that, really. Our men will need twenty minutes tops to clean this mess up before the FBI agents barge in.

Our connections in the FBI promised they'll hold back any agents assigned to the case. They said an hour is all they can do for us.

They deserve worse, our *parents*. Years of torture. Spending the rest of their miserable lives behind bars.

Except the thought of having them locked up and breathing sickens me. An hour it is.

By then, they'll be gone. And no, no one will think they've been kidnapped or murdered.

But I digress.

We walk fast past the lobby of the building where Anne and I grew up. Nothing's changed in this concrete and metal prison. High ceilings, marble everywhere, dark wood features and two antique elevator doors.

Everything screams money. Not a whisper of pain and heartache seeps from these walls. None.

Fuck this place.

The man at the front desk lets the five of us through without a word. We cleared it with him a week ago. Transferred money to his account that'd put his two kids through college in case he lost his job over this.

A mysterious glitch in the security cameras for the time we spend here. That's all we asked in return. It didn't hurt to learn he loathes Joseph as much as I do.

Anne and Damien head to the elevators. Quinlan, Liam and I are right behind them. The violent energy that's been building inside me since the moment we left home hasn't let up on the way here.

If anything, it expanded. It's taken over every part of my body. Hatred soaks my blood. The need to avenge me, but mostly Anne, is everywhere.

"Their plane took off." Liam, on the other side of Quinlan, shoves his phone into his pocket. "The Langfords are officially on their way to Vietnam."

We join Damien and Anne, waiting for the elevators. The corners of Quinlan's lips lift, curving into a wicked smirk. She knows which *Langfords* Liam is talking about.

She heard all about it on the way over here. Jagger and his girlfriend, Nila—his future wife, according to Damien—play a big part in our plan.

Jagger came up with fake passports for him and Nila. We bribed the officials in the airport and the Langfords' pilot and plane crew.

Money solves just about anything, Quinlan repeated my words. And she was right. As far as the world is concerned, Joseph and Elaine Langford are on a flight to a country with non-extradition treaty with the US where they'll stay for good.

"What's on your mind, sweetheart?" My fingers run along the delicate curve of her neck. The word *murder* plays on repeat in my head, yet somehow, I have it in me to be mildly soft. Caring even. "Something's going on in this beautiful head of yours. Tell me."

She doesn't say a word. I've learned this about Quinlan over the time we spent together. This is my day. My moment. She won't steal the limelight.

Unless I demand she does.

Liam joins Damien and Anne's conversation. They don't see how any trace of softness vanishes from my expression.

Quinlan does. My hand closes on her cheek, hurting her the way she loves. "We're going home. Right this fucking minute. Unless you start talking."

"Rome." She searches my eyes, frowning. "I was smiling. That's all."

A subtle shake of her head gets her talking.

“Fine.” A sigh, then her smile returns. “Is it sick that I have butterflies?” Quinlan’s large gray eyes look at me as the five of us start filing into the elevator. I’m still holding her. “It’s like I don’t even recognize myself anymore.”

“It’s hot is what it is.” Damien tugs on her hair.

“You don’t have to turn everything into—” Red travels up Quinlan’s neck and cheeks. She remembers that Anne’s here. Clears her throat. “I was talking to Rome.”

“He’s right. It is hot.” The elevator goes up. My blood boils and still, I have this moment to give her. “You’ve always been this person, sweetheart. Good and feisty and unhinged. You needed to stop surviving and start living to see that, that’s all. You’re not sick.”

“Sick is starving your children for the fuck of it,” Anne laughs, her pitch a tad too high. Guess I’m not the only one getting worked up. “Wanting them dead is justice.”

“Okay.” Just as Quinlan says that, the elevator reaches the top floor of the building.

We step out into the hall. The pounding between my ears is loud, but the rhythm is slow and consistent. Confident.

“We’ll keep her safe.” Liam slides his arm around Quinlan’s waist, tucking her into his side.

“What?” Her head whips toward him. “I’m not staying out here.”

Damien stands on her other side. “Of course you aren’t. No one will. We’ve been waiting for this for years.”

My thumb caresses the bandage on my right ring finger one time, and then I fish the penthouse key from my pocket. That was the easiest part to retrieve, thanks to their locksmith.

Anyway.

“Here we go,” Anne whispers. The metal glints under the glow of the overhead, expensive light fixtures of the hall. Her eyes shine brighter. “This is it, brother.”

This isn’t the right moment to hug anyone. This isn’t the time to feel any other thing than the need for revenge.

It really isn’t.

“Yes.” I hug my sister regardless.

“This ends today.” She pulls away.

“It is.”

The key fits in its hole. The lock gives in. One click, one push on the bronze handle, and the door opens.

My stomach roils that first second I step inside. This goddamn place hasn't changed. The white marble floor is clean and inviting as the warm lights are. An original painting hangs on one of the walls of the foyer.

Antique wood furniture lines the other. There'll be more of it throughout the place. They belonged to a Duchess from wherever the fuck. Whatever I had in my room, I broke and tarnished before I hauled my suitcase and my sister out of this hellhole.

This deceiving fucking hellhole.

Memories push their way up. They try to assault me.

I'm that kid again. Curled into a ball in the corner of my room after two days without food. My stomach was so empty. Elaine's empty expression when I begged her to spare Anne. *Anything, even dog food would do.*

Fuck this. I push them back to where they belong. Far away where they'll never bother me again.

No more.

"Why the hell do I pay you, you bunch of incompetent imbeciles?" my father shouts, his voice booming from the living room. Bouncing off the walls. This isn't the tone he used on us when he announced there'll be no food for the next few days. He isn't calm. Not enjoying himself. "You're my PR firm. Your job is—Shut up, idiot. Shut up and listen. Damage control is what you do, is it not?" The brief silence ends with a, "So fucking do it. Our stock will not plummet. No one's removing me from my own company. No. One."

A sob cuts through the thundering silence. Elaine.

A high marble wall separates the foyer and the living room. I can't see what's going on there.

I know what doesn't. Joseph doesn't comfort her. He doesn't have his arm around her shoulders. Doesn't kiss her and promise he'll fix this for her. He doesn't care about her.

All those years. Her blind devotion and taking his abusive side over ours.

It was for nothing.

Anne sneaks a glance at me, her eyebrows high, lips pinched. She wants—no, *needs*—to kill them.

Our time is running out.

But I need to be here. Where I am. Where we are. I need this minute to absorb his misery. Joseph's at his weakest. At his most vulnerable.

He won't give me the pleasure of watching him crumble. The second we march into the living room, he'll regain his composure. The cold, heartless bastard that had terrorized Anne and me for years will rob me of this part of my revenge.

I put a hand on Anne's shoulder. My right hand, with Quinlan's mark on it.

Dark blue eyes gaze up at me in confusion. She's shorter than I am, shorter than she's been in the penthouse now that she's changed into the sneakers I've been saving for her in my car.

Listen, I mouth, leveling her with a serious gaze.

Curses. Glass crashes on the marble floor. He's on another phone call, shouting and cursing. One of his contacts in the government, by the sound of it. Ordering them to close the stock market until he proves the article was a hit job. Fake news.

He won't be able to. What he's doing is stalling. Just long enough so federal agents won't come knocking while he liquidates his assets and disappears.

Someone beat you to it, you piece of shit.

"I want it done within the hour. Don't call me before that." Joseph ends the conversation. Shatters another vase or one of Elaine's crystal figurines.

She cries harder.

Three hands rest on my back. Two larger ones. One small and warm.

We're here, their touch assures me. *You're not alone in this*.

I'm not. Haven't been in a long fucking while.

Every muscle in my body tenses. My fingers flex on Anne's shoulder. I stare at eyes that are the same blue shade as mine, then turn around and grab Quinlan's neck. I don't just kiss her. I devour her. Brutally. A true savage. Much like she is.

"Unfortunate news, Joseph." My voice is eerily calm as we step into the living room, reminding me a lot of Liam's.

The two monsters in the living room snap their heads at us.

Elaine is in a pale pink blouse and matching pencil skirt, her light-brown hair twisted into a bun at her nape. Just how Joseph demands her to be at all times.

Presentable. The perfect cover to help hide how rotten *he* is.

She can’t pull it off today, not really. Her blue eyes are puffy, bloodshot. A few strands of her hair have escaped her neat bun, clinging to her black mascara streaks on her cheeks.

She’s a mess.

Joseph seems to be handling it better than her. Dressed in a dark blue suit, his brown eyes are furious. His black, graying hair is combed to the side. As if he’ll step out of here any minute. As if he has a chance to be saved.

Joke’s on him. He’s not leaving. No one’s here to save him.

This is the end of the line for him. For both of them.

I close the distance between us, while Joseph stares at me. He doesn’t say a word, shifting his gaze behind me. To my real family.

“Too scared to face me on your own?” Arrogant prick. He smirks, his eyebrow quirking. “You’ve always been such a coward, Roman.”

“He’s not a coward, you fuck,” Anne hisses, moving to my side.

Small fingers squeeze my waist from behind.

Quinlan.

Once this is over, the three of us are dragging her home. She’ll cry and come and—

Not now.

“No one calls me Roman anymore.” No one has for years.

In fact, he’s the only one who’s ever called me that.

Forget about dinner, Roman.

Was that attitude? Good job, Roman. You just landed you and your sister a forty-eight-hour water fast. Just water.

You think you can punch me, Roman? Look at you. You’re weak. You’ll always be weak.

I changed my legal name to Rome the second I broke my trust fund. Couldn’t run fast enough.

“Triggered by a name?” he goads me, playing games. It was always games with him. “You’re the same pussy you were when you ran out of here. With your tail between your legs, if I remember correctly. Weak, pathetic man-child. Your position and money mean nothing when deep down you’re a loser.”

His fingers tap on the screen of his phone. Elaine ambles toward the hallway, undoubtedly trying to escape my wrath.

“Don’t.” I point a finger at him.

Anne stalks toward the cowardly woman, grabbing her by her bun. My sister laughs at the sound of her screams, the giggle even more unhinged than before. I don't blame her.

Elaine's pain is delicious.

"Or what? You'll hurt me?" Joseph's chuckle draws me back to him. It grates on my nerves.

I soak it up, knowing damn well the man is terrified and doing his best to hide it.

His smile never reaches his eyes. It used to, before. Doesn't anymore.

"You'll go to prison for this." He waves his phone at me. "Then what? You'll leave your sister with her poor excuse of a husband?"

"Nick is a better person than your useless ass will ever be," she growls, tugging on Elaine's hair harder.

"*Ahhhh!*"

Anne smiles down at her. "Shut up, bitch."

"You'll leave her with these people?"

This is how he'd always manipulated me. Anne is my weak spot. But even if I die today, nothing will happen to her. She's strong all on her own. The people I've surrounded myself with are just as strong and love her just as fiercely as I do. She'll never want for anything again.

"Who the hell is this woman, anyway? You've finally found someone desperate enough to date *you*?" He tilts his head, looking at Quinlan. I step in front of her. "You're not that bad looking. You could do better than this good for nothing. This man-child."

The second I see Liam shoving Quinlan behind his back, I pounce forward. I'm around the leather sofa and past the coffee table at an inhuman speed. Fueled by my rage. By my thundering sense of justice.

My teeth are bare. Fists clenched.

Red. My whole fucking world is red. That's the color of revenge, of the need to protect what's mine.

Joseph stumbles back, doesn't make it far. I bat the phone out of his hand.

His throat is in my hand, my face in his. This isn't how I choke Quinlan. I'm not being careful with his windpipe.

Quite the opposite.

"Don't you dare talk to her," is the first thing I say, hauling him closer. "This is about you and me."

He clutches at my T-shirt. "About you going to prison."

“This again?” I shake him. “You really think I’ve waited all these years to end up in prison?”

Joseph is a couple of inches shorter than I am. His idea of working out is playing golf with his rich buddies. He struggles in my hold, his fingers rising higher to claw at my hand as he gasps for air.

The smell of his fear is intoxicating.

“Answer me.”

When I shake him a second time, that’s when his new reality sinks in. His pupils are huge. His forehead glistens with a sheen of sweat.

That doesn’t stop him from testing me. “You won’t g-get away with this. You’ll die in prison.”

“What’s that, *Dad*? You’re worried about me all of a sudden?” The adrenaline rushing through my veins nearly blinds me. I’m drowning in it. “Don’t. You worry about staying alive long enough for me to shatter every bone in your body.”

I’ll never forget this. The first punch to Joseph’s cheekbone, to the area below his eye. The way my bloodied knuckles crack against bone. The way righteousness isn’t a word anymore, it’s a feeling.

“Leave him alone,” Elaine sobs.

Sobs.

For the twenty-six years we’d lived here, she hadn’t shed one goddamn tear over Anne or me.

She was either angry or annoyed. When Anne cried too loud. When we started BLF, and I could afford taking my sister out to restaurants whenever they let her out of the house. They never caught me, but Anne gained weight. They made her throw up, but not always. Not all the time.

Elaine scolded me for the new clothes she had to buy my sister. Acted like she was doing me a favor by not snitching to our *father*.

“No.” My fist lands on the same place on his face, the *crack* somehow louder than before. I must’ve broken a bone, or maybe just cracked it. That’s fine. We have time to do more damage. “You’re getting what you deserve, old man.”

I toss him on the floor, and he lands there like a pile of old, sweaty clothes. He’s quick to school his bewildered expression. His hands—*fuck yes*—they betray his fear, flying up to protect his face.

Anne laughs, and it sounds the craziest of all her laughs up until this moment. Nothing wrong with that.

Hell, I don’t feel all that *normal* myself. Whatever that means.

“That’s a lie. You’ll never get everything you deserve.” I’m on my knees, one hand around his throat, connecting my fist to his ribs. One, two, three. A hundred times. “It’s unfortunate that I’ll have to settle for”—I grip his wrists, wrenching his hands off his face—“just a few punches. You’ll be dead in no time. Truly unfortunate.”

Someone’s watching me. Calling for my attention.

Not Anne. She’s over at my side, crouched over Elaine, who she threw on the floor. She pokes the tip of a dip pen into Elaine’s throat. *Stab*. *Stab*. *Stab*. The bitch keeps sobbing and screaming. There are already five holes there. Blood trickles down, tainting the collar of her blouse. The floor.

Anne’s not the one who’s looking at me. In fact, she’s doing great. When we talked on the phone the other day, I didn’t know how much she needed this. I’m glad she convinced me to bring her with us.

This leaves my friends. My Quinlan.

Joseph groans, miserable beneath me. Reminding me why I’m here.

Carnage. I’m there. So fucking ready.

But I make time for her. I’ll always make the fucking time for her.

I stab my knee into Joseph’s cracked ribs, keeping him in place. As I look over my shoulder, I half-expect to be met with disappointment in Quinlan’s gray eyes. Fear of the animal I’m transforming into before her. Her hands clasping Damien and Liam’s, begging them to protect her.

I’ve never been so wrong in my life.

Our unhinged, wild woman smiles. Her smile is huge. No one’s comforting her. The three of them are there, their gazes dark and approving.

Quinlan gives me the thumbs up. Blows me a kiss. “You’ve got this, baby.”

I lift my hand just in time to catch her air kiss. With a somber expression, I press it to my cock. *I love you*, I mouth.

“What in God’s name is this, Roman?” Joseph reminds me he’s still alive. Still well enough to talk. “Is this what you’ve been up to? Dating a psycho bit—”

The derogatory name dies a violent death on his lips. The next punch I administer knocks out two of Joseph’s front teeth. They graze my knuckles as they fly out of his mouth.

“Shut your goddamn mouth.” *Crack*. More blood and half a tooth fly out of Joseph’s mouth. “I warned you, not a fucking word about Quinlan.” The

next five blows knock him unconscious. I sink my knee deeper into his ribs, shaking his head until his eyes flutter open. “You’re not dealing with her. You’re dealing with me.”

“With us.” I hear Damien.

“Rome will kill you,” Liam adds. “Then we’ll hunt you all the way down to hell.”

My brothers.

Elaine’s howling now. Her voice is soaked in what I can only imagine is blood. Anne must have hit an artery.

My heart bursts with pride.

“Stop,” Joseph whispers, blood sputtering on his chin. “Stop, Roman.”

“I told you I hate that name.”

I press Joseph’s cheek to the floor, connecting a fist to his ear. His scream is—what a goddamn irony—ear piercing. I repeat the motion, coaxing more agonized cries out of him.

“You, I feel nothing for you.”

My knuckles are painted red. My blood *and* his. Finally.

Words race to the surface, but each of them is lodged in my throat. A long list of accusations I want him to hear in his final moments. Things he’s ought to apologize for.

They stay there.

Knowing this fucker, it’ll go right over his head. He’ll never experience remorse. His apologies will never be genuine.

For the slightest chance that his last words will terrorize Anne, that he’ll mock her for the pain she had to endure, I shut up.

I obliterate Joseph’s face.

Nose, eye sockets, jaw.

These are for Anne’s protruding ribs that gave me nightmares for years.

I slam my fist to his throat. Don’t let up. Never let up.

Crack. This one went into his temple. It was for Anne’s tears. For each and every one of them.

The hint of a tremor races through my bicep at the excessive force.

I don’t stop, because—

The morning I walked into her room. My little sister chewed on the wall. On a piece of paper from her notebook. Just to have something—anything—to pad her very empty stomach.

“*Stop*,” Joseph groans when I’m taking a break from his face to yank his shoulder out of place. “Kill me, please.”

“Hmm.”

The day he was home early and emptied my bag. He threw away the food Damien or Liam brought me. I saved that for Anne.

I was so skinny. Couldn’t fend for my sister. Before she came into the world, there were days I wished for death. I didn’t understand the meaning of it. I only wanted the constant pain and the humiliation of being neglected to go away.

Until I had another person to look after.

“Stop.”

“Stop?” I laugh. I mock him. I pull out his other shoulder to a nauseating yet oh-so-pleasing cracking sound. “We’re having so much fun, though. Father and son bonding. Why would I ever stop?”

I do have to stop, though, at some point. We’re on a deadline.

“Anne, bring her over here.”

The woman who supported Joseph’s sick, sadistic idea of fun. The pathetic excuse of a mother who called up every favor they had to stop me from becoming Anne’s legal guardian the day I turned eighteen. Joseph punished both Anne and me for entertaining the idea. The bastard locked us in separate rooms, denied us food for three days straight. Didn’t matter that Damien and Liam pounded on the door to our home. Took advantage of the fact that I forbade them from calling the police. Joseph would’ve kicked me out if I did that. That was the only way I could stay close to Anne.

“Come, come, bitch.” Elaine doesn’t put up a fight as Anne drags her the short distance over to me.

Joseph coughs, screams. Of course he does. I’m ruthless, throwing his arms over his head. Holding him down by the wrists. His shoulders must be on fire.

“Throw her on top of his arms.” I look at Anne, my cruelty reflecting in her eyes. “I need them to stay pinned to the floor for this.”

“Yes, brother.” Anne follows my directions.

Elaine—who seems to have passed out—collapses on top of him. He squeals, wriggles his body.

He’s not moving anywhere.

Anne crouches beside me, ignoring Joseph’s curses. “Quinlan said she’d help if we needed her. On the drive over.”

I swallow. Hard. Anne's considering this. She's officially welcomed Quinlan to our family. And all it's taken was, what? An hour together?

It was meant to be. We were meant to be.

"What about you? Do you need her?" I whisper, not letting on how much I do, in fact, need Quinlan. How…*wholesome* it'd be for her to be a part of it.

My opinion could affect Anne's answer. And this isn't just about me. Hasn't been since I became a big brother.

Anne whirls a lock of hair around her finger. The blood that's dried on said finger isn't hers. It's Elaine's, and my sister smears it on her hair.

Her eyes aren't distant, though. She's present for this. No one's ever died from temporary insanity, so I guess it's fine.

More than that. She's having fun. Yeah, that's the word for it.

"Need?" Anne pushes the bloodied finger into the hollowed part where Joseph's arm used to be connected to his body.

He winces, the sadistic fucker, and the movement shifts Elaine on his arms. He screams again at the new pressure.

Good.

"Such a crybaby." Anne rolls her eyes. "Anyway. I think we're handling it. Except…" She looks over her shoulder, at the three people behind us. "We're not alone anymore, Rome. He doesn't have the power over us, either. We don't have to do it by ourselves."

"Anyone interested in fucking them up? With us?" I glance at them, swallowing around the damned emotion in my throat. "They're still breathing."

This half-plea, it's new to me. I hate feeling this raw and vulnerable. To have to ask.

Even though Damien and Liam have been offering it for years. And Quinlan, she stood there in our kitchen this morning picking out a knife for today.

The awkward feeling in my chest lasts for all of a second.

They don't make it weird. No one comes over with open arms to hug me.

They move. Then they're there. Liam and Damien crouch at Joseph's feet. Liam rubs his hands, Damien twists one of Joseph's feet left and right. Warming up by the looks of it.

"No knives?" Quinlan rounds the two barely alive people, stopping next to me, closer to Joseph's head. Still standing, she taps her sneaker.

“I can get you one from the kitchen.” Anne’s smile widens.

“You know, I thought I’d need one too. But…” She squats down, talking to Anne with her gaze on me. “Rome taught me a few moves yesterday. I’d like to try them.”

Pride. And love. And this peaceful sense of finality.

“Go right ahead.” I rub her arm. My hand stays there, guiding her, as Quinlan rears her arm back, bending her elbow. Aiming for maximum impact.

“Wait.” Damien’s smirk is so fucking audible, it makes Quinlan giggle.

“What?” Suddenly, I don’t want to be here anymore. I want these people dead. I want the men we hired for this to clean this shit up and be home.

I want Quinlan in one of our beds.

“It’s going to be a good one,” Liam comments. “I can feel it.”

“Talk.” Anne elbows Damien, her eyes glimmering. “I have a husband to get back to.”

“What if we all did it together?” Damien’s eyes bounce between us. “Anne, you kill this bitch up there. Quinlan and Rome, you’re in charge of pretty boy’s face. Liam and I have ankles to break.”

“Oh my God, yes,” Quinlan and Anne high-five while Joseph keeps fading in and out of consciousness.

While he and Elaine bleed out on their precious floors.

“Damien, you’re a genius.” She beams at him.

“Well, I am the one who suggested we kidnap you, so, yeah.” His tone bathes the room in warmth.

“Oh, fuck. I’m so sorry.” Her smile falters when she turns to me. She nibbles on her bottom lip, her hand cupping my cheek. “I’m so rude. I got caught up and forgot to ask. What do *you* want, Rome?”

My hand’s on her neck, pulling her in for a bruising kiss. A punishing one, for being the least rude, most considerate person I’ve ever met. “I want this. I want us. Together.”

“Good.”

This is what love feels like. This is what home is.

I shake my head, unable to suppress the smile on my lips.

“You did it.” Quinlan traces her fingertip over my wounded knuckles. “I adore you. I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Let’s do this.” Anne looks at us, then at her other two big brothers, Damien and Liam.

We assume our positions.

Anne’s at Elaine’s head, cupping her jaw in a faux-loving grip. She’ll bash her head into the floor until Elaine’s brain drips out. That’s what this hold means.

Quinlan aims for Joseph’s least swollen eye. I’ll land one punch after the other to his chest. Until it stops beating. Maybe, if I’m lucky, I’ll punch a hole through there. Damien and Liam have their hands on each of his ankles.

“Five,” Anne starts.

“Four,” Quinlan goes.

“Three.” It’s Damien.

“Two.” Liam furrows his brow, giving me a reassuring stare.

I return to direct my fist at my aim. “One.”

Bones break. Agonized screams bounce off the walls.

A couple of *fuck yeses*.

A sonorous end to two miserable lives.

May they never rest in peace.

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CHAPTER FORTY

Liam

WE STAND IN MY bedroom, the four of us. We haven't spoken since we left Rome's childhood home.

Well, haven't talked about anything that matters. We've been moving through the motions, anxious to be home already.

We killed two people. Slayed two monsters.

Then we went back to acting like normal, non-murdering people. Dropped Anne off at her home, walked her into her apartment to make sure she's okay. She looked fine. Composed. Nick is there for her, in case she was pretending. There to love her. To care for her. His mind isn't littered with images and sounds of people taking their last agonized breaths.

Two monsters, I remind myself. *We did good*.

What are we doing here, again? I want to say something. Someone should say something.

"Liam?" Quinlan stares up at me in the dimly lit room. Her gray eyes are wide, pupils blown. High from the carnage. So am I. "Are you okay?"

This isn't regret coursing through my body. Not blame.

Fuck that.

These were justified murders.

What I feel is power. The boost of adrenaline that started back in Rome's childhood home won't go away.

“Shirt. Off.” I don’t wait for Quinlan to remove the damn thing. My hands slap hers away, and I yank it up her body. Whip it off her. Toss it to the floor.

“Jeans. Now.”

Without much effort, Rome yanks Quinlan toward him by the back of the waistband of her jeans. She yelps, her eyes searching for Damien and mine. Neither of us is going to help against Rome. She wouldn’t want us to, either.

The feral look hasn’t left her gaze. That’s how I know she likes this. Needs this violence to take the edge off.

We all do.

Rome has his plans. He’s brought his sharpest knife up here. The knife that’s meant to cut meat. To go through bone, if he’s in the mood to do the butchering himself.

He could use a cleaver. He prefers this.

“You’ve been such a good girl today.” Rome’s chin is on her shoulder, his thumb on the button of her jeans. He could snap it open. Shove Quinlan’s jeans to the floor.

He won’t.

“Helping me out.” Quinlan’s wise to stay very still when he tugs on her jeans, separating them from her belly. “Showing me you paid attention in our session yesterday.”

“I did.”

She pretends to be wary of Rome and us. A pretense is all this is. Her head falls back to his shoulder. Her hands careful as she places them on his forearms.

“Such a good girl.” Damien advances on them.

His deviant gaze evokes whimpers from her. I think she might actually be scared of the creepy smirk stretching his lips. It turns him right the fuck on. He stops in front of her, towering over her on purpose.

He likes her scared. He likes the knife Rome’s holding close to her jeans.

“The way Joseph’s blood sprayed on your face.” He strokes her cheek, a light touch before he grips her by the jaw. “Got me so fucking hard, darling. I would’ve fucked you then and there. Any hole you’d have offered. I’d fucking take it.”

Her face has been cleaned since. We all went in for a quick shower in Rome’s old bedroom and changed into an identical set of clothes we walked

in with. Clean ones. Our men brought a bag over so we wouldn't raise suspicions once we left the building. They swiped the bathroom clean after we left, too.

But much like Damien, I haven't forgotten how she hit Joseph. How hard the blow was. How blood splatters painted her cheeks like a vicious queen. The Red Queen.

"I was so close to having you there." A couple of sawing into the jeans, and Rome slices through the waistband. "Fuck, sweetheart. If Anne wouldn't have been there…" He pauses, rolling his hips. Smirking as the knife teases Quinlan's panties. "I'd have fucked you on top of their corpses. Move them next to each other, made a makeshift bed out of these fuckers. Would've spread your legs and desecrated their bodies by sucking on your clit until you wept."

He keeps slicing her jeans until his hand can't reach any lower.

Watching my friends scare and defile Quinlan gets me so fucking hard. Makes me fucking throb. I stroke myself, keeping my distance. For now.

At her crotch, Rome hands the knife over to Damien.

I'm harder in an instant as soon as Damien kneels before her. When he looks like he's about to go down on our girl. Except he isn't there to eat her out. He's on his knees to gain access to the leg of her jeans.

He's careful as he cuts along her inner thigh, tearing the fabric. He pushes the ripped pieces down to her calf, her ankle.

"What else would you have done to her?" There's a single drop of blood just above her knee. I groan at the sight of Damien licking it off her. At the sound of her moaning for him. "You would've shared her, wouldn't you?"

Her thighs clench, breath hitching. The subtle gestures could've gone unnoticed by another man. Someone who didn't care about her. A man who hasn't fantasized about her day and night for years.

By a fool.

The tick in Rome's jaw says he's noticed, same as I have. Damien's grip on her naked thigh is his dead giveaway. And while I can't see myself, I have no fucking doubt it shows on my face. Fire flicks behind my eyes. In my chest.

"No." Rome stares at me. "I would've called Liam to brutalize your pretty mouth with his cock."

Damien gets up, his hand on Quinlan's cheek. She parts her lips for him. I keep stroking myself, not minding one fucking bit that I'm being watched

by them too.

“Would’ve flipped you on your side.” Rome continues, his hand trailing along her belly. “You would’ve been so wet. I’d drag your arousal to your ass. Stretched you with two fingers before I spread you wider with my cock.”

Quinlan’s eyes land on my hand. On the slow movements and the erection straining my jeans. She might be expecting me to take my Zippo out. Or my cock.

I won’t.

Today is all about Rome.

“Liam.” Her hesitation—her fear—are such a fucking turn-on. This won’t be the last time she’ll sound like this tonight. “You’re too far.”

“What’s this? You? Ordering me?” I fake indifference.

It works. She winces. Winces harder when Rome slides his hand around her neck and squeezes.

“I thought—”

“You thought nothing.” Damien pulls on her panties, slicing them right down the middle.

The flimsy material almost makes it to the floor when Damien snatches it. Sniffs it.

Shoves it into her mouth. She’s so beautiful, cheeks full and lips pressed together around her torn panties.

“Killing people together, it’s even more serious than making a vow,” he hisses, his fingers pinching her lips even tighter. “And we did it with you today. You’re going to keep being a good girl, darling. Trust that we’re never leaving.”

“That if we go, it’s so we could get you everything you want.” Rome’s rough, yanking the cups of Quinlan’s bra down, exposing her breasts to us. “What you need.”

He’s not wrong. And she’s gorgeous. Her nipples pink and hard and, God, fuck, I can’t stop obsessing over them. On whether I can make her come by sucking and flicking my tongue on them.

Damien’s less patient than Rome and I are, using the knife to tear her bra off. Pink and so delicious, I nearly abandon my mission.

“You might scream.” Damien twists his head to me, smirking, before he’s back to staring at her. “You might cry. You’ll definitely have marks on your skin for hours. More than these.” He traces a knuckle of her bandaged

stomach, the gesture reverent. “Then again, isn’t that what you’re desperate for? Being our whore?”

She moans around her gag. She loves degradation, has learned to embrace just how much she gets off on it.

Damien throws the knife away from them. Together, he and Rome lead her to the bed.

“But first, I’ll make you feel good.” While Rome removes his T-shirt, Damien’s already on top of her, his hand on her clit. “So good. We need you wet. Need to make you come.”

He pins her arms over her head, with one hand on her wrists, the other between her spread legs. Stroking her pussy. Drawing moan after moan out of her. He’s worshipping her, pressing his body to her naked one. Licking her lips. Her cheeks are puffy with her panties stuffed in there.

“Such a pretty fuck doll.” I’m done being an observer. I move in next to a naked Rome. My hand cups her cheek, forcing her to look at me. “You can’t fight this anymore than you could fight the murderous little devil inside you.”

Her cheeks flush. Breath picking up. She’s close.

“Fuck doll,” Rome muses while his fingers twist and tug on one of her nipples, then the other. “I like the sound of that. Fitting. Such a perfect little fuck doll.”

While he might sound gentle, there’s no mistaking the edge in his voice.

“You know what I think?” My face is turned to him, my thumb stroking and digging into Quinlan’s cheek.

“What?” Damien asks, though I can’t be sure how much he cares for my answer.

His mouth is on the nipple that Rome doesn’t pinch and torture. By the sound of Quinlan’s scream, he’s biting her.

“Well?” Quinlan’s coming, and Rome’s talking to me like nothing’s happened. Almost.

He does that for her. She gets off on the humiliation. And she can see the outline of his hard cock in his jeans, just in case she has any doubt about how much he loves her. How much he’s desperate to fuck her through her orgasm.

“I think she’s soaked,” I say.

Damien makes a low voice in the back of his throat as he sucks on her neck, agreeing with me as his fingers keep fucking her.

“You could act out on your fantasy, Rome.” Our eyes do that silent communication we’ve done for years. “Minus the dead parents part.”

“Dead *monsters*,” he corrects, ridding himself of his jeans and briefs. “What do you say, Damien?”

Quinlan moans and wriggles in our hold. I remove the gag and press a finger to her swollen lips, silencing her. Her whimper against my skin is sweet. She’s fighting me just enough to prove to us that she’s trying to escape.

Damien pulls his fingers out of her, sucking on them while looking at us. “She could use the extra lube.”

“More lube?” Rome jerks his chin, a sign for Damien to move out of the way. Which he does. Rome gets on the bed, flipping her on her belly and moving her to the center. His open palm lands on her ass. On the backs of her thighs. “I’ll give you more lube.”

While he turns her ass red, I lose my clothes. Adjust the switch of the lamp at my bedside to the lowest light possible, for Damien. He should be able to be naked around her too.

“Rome, no, I—”

“Little flame.” I’m on my knees beside her. My hand clamps on the back of her neck, shoving her head to the pillow. “Haven’t we been clear?”

Her eyes widen in terror. She makes it look so real. “About what?”

Damien finally strips on the other side of Quinlan, where she can’t see him. He’s back on the bed, naked, running his finger along the curve of her spine. Evoking tremors as Rome slaps and slaps and slaps her ass.

“The word *no* isn’t a part of your vocabulary anymore.” Damien leans in to bite on her shoulder while Rome spreads her butt cheeks. “The word *fire* will stop this, though. In case it gets too much.”

For me. He does that for me.

“Fire?” She gapes at me.

“Yes,” Damien says.

Rome yanks her hips up, fingering her pussy. She moans and groans into my palm, gasping when he pulls them out of her.

She screams when he shoves two soaked fingers into her tighter hole. Groans and grips the pillow as he stretches her. Breathes harder when he spits on her crack, rubbing his saliva into her.

“That’s enough lube for you, sweetheart?” He’s being cruel. It turns her on, her hips pushing back on him.

“Answer him,” I growl.

“No,” she whispers, licking her lips. Defiant little thing.

My head shakes. “That word again.”

“And after all this time, you still lie to us. Begging us to punish you.” Damien adds a finger to Rome’s two, spitting on them, lubing her some more. Stretching her to accommodate them. “Such a slut for pain.”

“I’m not lying.” She’s panting. Her eyes dark. She’s definitely lying.

I get the bottle of lube at the bedside table, throwing it on the bed. That’s for later. Now, I press a finger between her thighs.

Goddamn it.

“Dripping. Our lying fuck doll is soaked.”

“Oh, God.” Eyes rolling, she finally relents. Finally admitting to how much she needs this.

“Playtime is over.” Rome rolls over on his back, dragging her on top of him.

Her back presses to his chest, and I’m quick to turn her face to me and away from Damien. She won’t be able to see him, not when it’s this dark. I do it anyway.

Rome pops the top on the lube bottle, squirting a healthy dose on his cock, stroking it. He holds the base, his other arm looped around Quinlan’s waist.

“I want that pretty ass riding me,” he murmurs into her ear. “Or there will be consequences.”

“You’re so big,” she squirms when the head of his cock slides into her. “It hurts. Please, Rome.”

“That’s the whole point.” He pulls on her hair, his palm on her stomach pushing her lower. “You need it rough. Need the pain. I need it.”

“You only have yourself to blame.” Damien positions himself between her spread legs, spitting on her clit. Rubbing her. Pinching her. “Since you’re the one who chose to lie to us.”

Her screams and gasps for air would never get old. I’ll never get used to this.

“I can still see Rome’s dick, Quinlan.” My palm rests on her stomach, in the space above Rome’s hand. “You’re being a brat. It’s going to cost you.”

“He’s too big,” she repeats, her small fingers clawing at my chest. At my arm.

A pause. I give her these seconds to say *fire*.

Her lips twitch, offering me the tiniest smirk for a moment.

“You can take it.” I shove her down on his length. He rocks his hips, and I keep helping her down, telling her what a good girl she is, such a perfect fuck doll, how beautiful she is taking his cock in her ass.

As soon as he’s fully seated inside her, Damien slams into her pussy.

“Fuck,” she screams, her nails tearing at the skin of my arm.

“That’s right.” Damien’s hands are on her thighs, rocking into her in a punishing rhythm. Just like Rome does beneath them. All the time, I force her to look at me. Only me. “We’re fucking you, darling. You’re taking us so well.”

My erection is painful. I’m hard and throbbing. Aching for Quinlan from head to motherfucking toes.

I want to play out Rome’s fantasy. And mine.

“Don’t move.” She nods at my order. “Keep your beautiful face right where it is.”

“Yes.”

She’ll keep her word; I know she will. That’s what makes it easy for me to turn and stalk to my closet. Come back with my Zippo and the candles I bought just for her.

When I return, I have to subdue the urge to stay in place and watch the two of them fucking her. How they pin her between them. How she stares directly at me like I ordered.

Not today. Probably not ever again.

“I’m going to mark you, little flame.” The weight of my Zippo is familiar in my palm. The added candle…less so. “Your breasts… Black and blue and red from Damien’s teeth and Rome’s fingers. All that’s missing there is me.”

“Liam.” She’s terrified, desperate for this, and I haven’t even touched her. “Yes. No. Please.”

“Yes, sweetheart.” Rome looks over her head at what I’m doing while he thrusts into her ass. “The answer is yes. More.”

They’re all watching me now.

Flick. A flame comes to life. The wick of the red wax play candle catches fire and I fling the Zippo to somewhere behind me. I aim the candle to one of Quinlan’s breasts, the one closest to me.

“Ready?”

“I don’t know.” Her words are chopped, the sounds of bodies slapping together filling the room.

“Doesn’t matter.”

My gaze flickers between our girl’s pouty, parted lips, the melting wax, and—

“Oh, fuck.” Her back arches, though there’s nowhere for her to go. Nowhere with Rome and Damien holding her between them. Fucking her. Owning her. And now me. “Oh, *fuck*, Liam, it hurts so bad.”

“Give it a second.”

Teary, accusing eyes stare at me. “How would you know?”

“I jacked off to your photos, little flame.” I reach with the candle for her other breast. The second drop of wax to land on her, making her gasp. Making her scream. “I tested this brand on myself while I did. Came the hardest I’ve ever come in my life. Until I fucked you.”

My lips press and I blow out the candle. Throw it to the floor. I’ll clean it up later.

She groans behind clenched teeth, but her nipples are just as hard. And yes—that’s what I wanted. She’s coming. Crying and begging, her body shaking in my friends’ hold.

“Fuck, yes.” Rome’s hands grip Quinlan’s hips, shoving her deeper onto him. “That’s a good girl.”

“That’s a fucking good girl,” Damien adds, his thumb stroking her clit, stretching out her orgasm.

I palm both her breasts, taking pleasure in my handiwork. At the wax covering her skin. At Quinlan’s *yes, please, more*. Just like Rome ordered her.

“Our sweet, dirty girl.” I get on top of her, straddling her face. “You’re going to give Rome his fantasy.” I shove her bottom lip down, tap the damp head of my dick to her lips. “Suck, little flame.”

Her tongue peeks out for me, and I jerk my hips forward. In one shove, I’m all the way in, groaning at the resistance from the back of her throat. I wish I could let go completely. Be harsh and unrelenting. But it’ll hurt Rome.

So I’m restraining myself. Barely. I flatten a hand on the headboard, placing another one behind her head. I feel Rome, and it doesn’t bother me. All I care about is their pleasure. My friends’ and hers.

Mine.

It’s an indescribable kind of pleasure too, to thrust into her like this. To have her lips wrapped around my cock, feel her moans vibrating on my hard length. Tears run down her temples and she gags so beautifully for me.

This is love. This is everything. This is—

“Oh, fuck, I’m coming.” The pressure in my balls is overwhelming. My stomach coils, my muscles straining.

“She’s coming with you,” Damien says, and she does moan louder. Her lips do close on me, squeezing me.

I’m too far gone to turn around and watch him pleasuring her.

Too far gone to look anywhere else but her face. I see her wide pupils and the need that burns like a red, vibrant flame on her features.

The sounds she makes are more like screams as her orgasm ripples through her. That’s when I lose it and finish inside her mouth. Spilling myself down her throat. Releasing more when she gags on me.

“That’s it.” I pull out, my eyes glued to her throat as she swallows. “Every drop. Such a good fuck doll. Such a good girl.”

I move off her, kissing her as my friends groan and use her. Pleasure her. They grunt their orgasms and empty themselves in her pretty little cunt. In her sweet little ass.

I’m so turned on that I could start all over again. Except I care for her. I love her. She’s our priority, and she needs the rest.

We carry her to the bath. We look after her. We hug her until she falls asleep.

We. Love. Her.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Quinlan

“HEY, STALKERS.” I WAVE at my camera on my laptop, my smile wide. “I’m heading downstairs for lunch. No need to have a coronary.”

I wish I was exaggerating.

I *love* that I’m not exaggerating.

Two days ago, it just about happened. They almost had a heart attack for real. That’s how mad they were about my disappearance.

We’d had the best week up to that point. A full week after we’d killed Rome’s parents.

Seven days of training with Rome in the gym. Damien and I had spent hours teasing each other and cuddling. He’d bite and torture me while I told him about my day. My feelings. Liam, man, he’d been so sweet and affectionate then would wake me up in the middle of the night. His cock would be shoved down my throat, his watchful eyes gouging for my reaction. For my terror.

The rest always joined him. Always.

So who could blame me for thinking I was no longer their captive?

No one.

No one but them.

One trip to the living room and all hell broke loose. Apparently, they didn’t like me out of sight for too long. I wanted to watch the city and imagine what they might look like at that moment, in their office.

They wanted me to have my cellphone on.

When I didn't go back to my room to answer their texts—in my defense, I was sure they were email notifications—the phone started ringing.

And it wouldn't stop.

"Picking the lock on the door won't work, darling." Damien sounded pissed, relieved, and maybe amused at my breathless hello. *"You'll never be able to run from us."*

"Paranoid much?" Fucking with any of them was unavoidable.

Not because I hated his possessiveness. I didn't hate anything about him at all.

It was just that fucking with them was too much fun.

"You're testing our patience," Rome thundered, though he hadn't actually thundered at all. I could hear the smile in his voice. The lightness in his mood hadn't been there before this week.

"Have been for the past ten minutes." Liam's heated tone meant I'd get wax on my breasts as a punishment. "We're installing cameras in the apartment tomorrow."

"Sheesh, can't a girl stalk you in peace?"

Silence. A loud one. They had to have been exchanging looks. Searching for the bugs I hadn't planted at their office.

I continued explaining what I meant by stalking. My ass was spanked raw when they got home anyway.

Two days later, my ass is just as sore. And no cameras have been installed around the house—yet. Those things haven't changed.

What's changed is my mood.

"I'm going to the living room," I repeat, then slam the laptop shut.

The fake smile on my lips dies the second I do. They won't have to witness my lips pressed into a tight line. How the joy from helping Rome and Anne had dissipated into nothing.

Anger pushes at my ribs and scalds my chest. It's a constant battle to hide the emotion from them. I promised I wouldn't do that, and yet I do. Bathing in misery. In hate. By myself.

They have a plan and I can't rush them.

But damn it all to hell, I'm impatient. Volatile. I need to avenge them and yesterday.

Liam's monster ex-babysitter is still alive.

Other than the minor inconvenience of looking after my parents, Rex hasn't paid for his crimes, either. Business as fucking usual. Has been for years.

As if he isn't guilty of anything. As if he hadn't hurt Damien and his foster siblings. Children.

"Ugh. I can't take it." I tug on a loose strand of my hair. Pull harder until it hurts. I try, my God, do I try not to lose it until both of them get their revenge.

Impossible.

My childhood hadn't been the worst, despite everything that happened to us. I had parents who loved me in their own way. An older half-brother there to sort of take care of us.

Damien didn't have that. During the time he lived under Rex's roof, he'd suffered. The gory details don't matter. I believe him. He wouldn't have kidnapped me—well, maybe that—but *murder*. He wouldn't have planned that for something dumb like Rex not letting him watch his favorite TV show.

There's a reason why he never lets me see his chest and abdomen. He always makes sure I have my back to him in the shower, and I respect him. I never turn around to demand information he's struggling to give to me.

I will never forgive Rex for this. I can't pretend it didn't happen, whatever *it* is.

And it's eating me from the inside. That I'd loved my half-brother. That I'd enabled his happiness.

My phone vibrates next to me, ripping me from my suffocating thoughts. I snatch it and read through the messages in our group chat.

Liam: *You know you can just drop by instead of watching us from the living room window.*

Damien: *We'll create new memories in the conference room.*

Rome: *Painful ones.*

Me: *You sure you want me to make a mess of your table?*

That's the best positive-upbeat message I can do, considering my mood. I'd hate for them to worry about me.

Damien answers almost immediately with a: *Ruin it for all I care. We'll get a new one and fuck you on it too.*

Banter is good. They have no idea I'm losing it. Otherwise, they would've been here already, like they did the last time.

They don’t need to be here.

It’s fine. It’s totally fine.

I’m fine.

My phone vibrates again as I stare out my window. The early afternoon’s clouds hide the clear blue of the sky. An omen of sorts.

The day Blake drowned started out with gray skies.

I don’t even notice that I’m stroking my tattoo until my finger is dampened by a sneaky tear.

Not going there, the voice in my head says. I swipe at my cheek angrily and check out my phone.

What I expected was a message from one of my men. It isn’t. It’s my newfound sister, Anne. A grin creeps on my face as I read her response to the text I sent her an hour ago.

Anne: *Q, I’m doing great! You? I had an early morning meeting with the bank, then work. So sorry I didn’t answer earlier!*

We exchanged numbers the day we met, and have been texting at least once a day since. Other than being funny and sweet, I do it because I care for her.

The four of us are here together as a unit. There’s always someone to talk to. Someone’s always up to make sure the others are okay. I might hide my frustration, but it’s easier to carry the burden when people who really get me are here all the time.

Anne has Nick, who Rome trusts, which is huge. And though I was told he’s a great guy, he wasn’t there with us. So I’m being that person for Anne.

Me: *I know, you told me yesterday :) I’m so happy for you! Let’s meet again soon when you can. Miss you!*

She doesn’t need the bank. Not really. Rome and her husband are wealthy. They’ve offered her the money, practically forcing her to take it.

Anne turned both of them down. I supported her. I always will. I told Rome that if she was going to do it while keeping her job at Caldwell Mullins until she’s ready to quit, then he should let her.

He did.

Anne: *Of course you do, captive ;)*

At her last message, I snort-laugh. She’s the one who promised to personally kick the men’s butts if they ever so much as upset me.

Which is no longer impossible.

I love them.

And fuck, that anger is back again. That protectiveness.

The more I sit at my desk, where I've been working all morning, the more useless I feel.

I get up, stretch my arms over my head, and wiggle my butt just to get the blood flowing. My muscles are sore from having too much sex and spending an hour a day annihilating the punching bag. I'm stronger for it. Probably happier than I would've been without it.

Soon my body will adjust to my new lifestyle. Then, nothing will stop me.

With my phone silenced and slipped into my jeans pocket, I descend the stairs where I've been spending my lunch breaks over the last few days.

The floor-to-ceiling windows call my name. Standing in front of them is where I feel closest to my men.

They'll be having lunch at one of their offices today. Rome and I cooked them the lasagna in the morning, and I wasn't sad when we made it. I was happy, creating new memories with them.

I hug myself, rubbing my forearms. I'm not cold or anything. The gray sweatshirt I'm wearing keeps me warm. I'd just rather imagine it's one of them, folding me into his arms from behind.

A light flashes from my jean pocket. My phone. I'll answer them later, once I get a hold of my emotions. Once I can smile through a conversation.

Soon.

The lock on the door clicks. Someone pushes it in, and my head whips in that direction.

That someone isn't Damien. He's not Rome. Not Liam.

"Ms. Palmer?" Ashton's red hair peeks through the crack in the door. He's one of the building's doormen, the only one to have the key to the penthouse. "The food delivery is here. Can I let Shawna in?"

A full minute passes for my heart to stop racing. I met both of them last week. Rome told me they were supposed to come here today, and I bet my phone flashed to remind me they'll be here. I just forgot.

And once my heart settles, a plan forms in my head.

A strong, consuming sense of mission fills me with newfound energy. My feet push me forward, toward the sneakers I left by the door after yesterday's boxing session.

Toward the door itself.

“Come in.” I’m jogging through the wide living room and into the foyer. “How are you, Ashton?”

“I’m doing well, thank you, Ms. Palmer. How have you been?”

While he holds the door open for Shawna, I shove my bare feet into my sneakers. Good thing I put on socks this morning. Good thing because I realize I don’t have a spare moment to waste as Ashton prepares to follow Shawna and her grocery cart into the kitchen.

Once he’s inside, I’ll lose the opportunity to leave the penthouse. The next time I’ll have a chance to get away is when Shawna leaves. They’ll see me trying to escape and I might fail. I’ll probably fail.

I like my chances better now.

“I’m great.” My long hair has fallen like a curtain around my face when I bent to tie my shoelaces, and I flip it back once I have my sneakers on. My hand flies to the doorjamb, pretending to help him do…something. “Here, I’ve got this.”

“Thank you, Ms. Palmer.” Ashton’s brown eyes are confused. “We’re already inside. You can let go. Thank you.”

The way he’s eyeing me, I bet this six-foot-million of a man was probably given instructions to keep me inside the apartment. Damien’s worried Rex might hurt me if he catches me outside.

Not if I hurt him first. If I scream at him in broad daylight. He wouldn’t dare lay a finger on me. There’ll be others in the café to hold him back.

I wouldn’t take his revenge from him by going out. But I have to speak up. I have to do *something* for Damien.

And I can’t do that if Ashton keeps looking at me like that.

Offering him a bright smile is my best option at the moment. “Of course. I just wanted to help.”

“Mr. Parks?” Shawna calls out to him from the kitchen. “Could you come over, please? It’s a breach of my contract to even be standing here alone.”

Ashton knows this. So do I.

“She’s right.” My fake smile does little to appease Ashton. His shoulders are squared, his black suit jacket stretching on them. He’s readying himself for an argument. “I won’t say a thing, but what if the security cameras over there…” I slip between him and the door, jerking my chin to the ceiling toward the nonexistent cameras. “If they document Shawna there, unsupervised? She could lose her job.”

The seed has been planted. Ashton's brow furrows. He takes another step into the penthouse.

I take one toward the hallway.

"Ms. Palmer, please," he says, though it's obvious that his attention is split between me and the kitchen.

That's all I need to pull the door and close it in his face. I break into a sprint and mash the button for the elevator. Again and again and again.

"Come on." I bounce on the balls of my feet, summoning the elevator to get here faster.

"Ms. Palmer." Ashton wrenches the door open, yelling behind me.

His footsteps echo in the hall. One, two, and then—

"Thank fuck." The metal door slides open, and I rush inside. Push the *close door* button first, then mash the one that'd take me to the lobby.

Close already, I pray to the god of elevator doors. *Please, just close and take me downstairs.*

"Ms. Palmer."

I scream when Ashton outstretches his arm.

He barely makes it before the door slides closed in his face. I hear him right before I start descending.

"We have a situation." His voice reaches past the closed door. "Ms. Palmer is on her way down. She'll be wearing—"

Just because I don't hear the rest doesn't mean I don't have the information I need. Whoever's occupying the front desk will look for a woman wearing a gray sweatshirt. That's the first thing they'll recognize when I step out to the lobby.

The sweatshirt has to go. I rip it off my body, fold it into a neat square, and hide it behind my back.

"I see someone," a tall, blond man in a black suit speaks into a black walkie-talkie. He leaves his station, approaching me, his gait long. When he lifts his palm to me, he says, "Ms. Palmer, hold, please."

"Me? Ms. Palmer?" Lying comes naturally to me today. It's as natural as the anger and sense of mission inside me.

"I was told…" The man cuts his gaze to my black shirt. This isn't the gray sweatshirt he's supposed to be looking for. His eyes narrow when they snap back to mine.

"Maybe it's the woman who got off on the fifth floor?" The soft sound of the elevator whooshing behind me means it's going up. To Ashton, who

could be back here at any moment. “Hair kind of like mine? Gray sweatshirt?”

The man’s thumb is punching the button on his walkie-talkie before I finish the sentence. “Fifth floor, Ashton.”

“On it.”

“I hope you find her.” I sidestep the bulky man, tucking the folded sweatshirt to my front. “Have a nice day.”

“You too, ma’am,” he says absently.

In a few long strides, I’m out in the street. A strange feeling creeps up my back. I sense a set of eyes on me, and my gut turns. My men aren’t here. When they stalk me, butterflies explode in my belly. I’m not nauseous like I am now.

Whoever this is, they’ll have to wait, if they’re even here at all. It could be the adrenaline making me imagine things.

I have to get to Rex.

My feet are the only mode of transportation available at the moment. Using the subway or hailing a cab isn’t an option when I don’t have a cent on me. I had my wallet app on my old phone. I don’t have anything on this one other than outgoing calls and texts to a few selected numbers.

I walk faster than I have in my entire life, blending into the crowd as best I can.

Rex will listen to me today, damn him. I’ll get all up in his face and confront him about being a monster.

As I’m eating up the distance toward Maeve’s, the world finally makes sense. The clouds have separated somehow. The skies are blue. Clear.

So is my head.

Rex hasn’t been grieving Blake’s death, I think. I don’t know that he ever has. The pain doesn’t follow him around like it does with me. It’s not an excuse for his behavior.

What caused Rex to be this controlling asshole is because I’ve been useful for him.

All those years.

All those fucking years.

He’s been pretending to be a saint when, in fact, he’s always been a monster. For over a year, he’d tortured three little kids. I’m not sure why he didn’t lay a finger on me, but I’m not grateful for it.

I’m so furious I can hardly see straight.

The people in suits and casual outfits and whatever the hell else blur in front of me. My eyes don’t see the street signs or awnings as I pass by the storefronts. My heart remembers the way to Maeve’s, and that’s all that matters.

My biceps strain, reminding me of the work Rome and I had done together in the gym. Nothing scares me anymore. Not a damn thing.

I might take things too far if we’re alone. In that case, I’ll knock him out, tie him, and call Damien to finish the job. He won’t get away with it.

Good idea, brain.

If Rex isn’t at Maeve’s, if he’s on his day off, I’ll just go to his apartment.

Minutes pass as I power walk through the city. I’m a ball of fire. A tornado hurtling forward at rapid speed.

A car screeches to a stop behind me. My breath hitches at the abrupt sound. I don’t stop, though, not for a second.

In a couple of minutes, I’ll make it to Maeve’s.

A strong arm covered in a dark blue jacket hooks around my middle, knocking the air out of me.

“What the fuck?” I gasp.

Stronger fingers dig into my waist. I’m being hauled into a firm chest. A man that pins me to him. A man whose lean and long body fits mine in a very familiar way.

But I can’t be sure. He could be a random kidnapper. A rapist.

The people on the sidewalk. Yes. They’ll help me if I scream, at least one of them.

Except my throat is too choked to scream. The man drags me back toward the curb. Must be to his car.

It’s now or never.

When I finally find it in me to scream, my sweatshirt is being yanked out of my grip and pressed to my gaping mouth before any sound comes out of it.

“Darling. You’ve been a bad girl. Such a bad girl.” Damien. It’s Damien who’s hard behind me. Whose heart rages against my back. His lips are in my ear. “Can you guess what happens to bad girls?”

I’m scratching his forearm. My feet try and fail to lift off the sidewalk to stomp on him.

I have things to do. An uncontainable, justified rage to unleash. It’s too big to contain. Too much for me to just stay here.

“Let me go,” I scream into my sweatshirt.

No one hears me. Not even Damien.

“Shh.” He shoves my cheek to the cool metal of his SUV. When my sweatshirt falls to the ground, his palm comes up to my mouth instead.

I look at him. My eyes talk for me, begging for him to listen. Telling him I have so much to make up for. That it’s wrong that I got to live an ignorant life while he…

While he…

A sob wrenches itself from the deepest, darkest places of me.

Damien doesn’t care. He doesn’t give a damn. That’s what the twisted amusement in his sapphire eyes tells me.

“Bad girls, darling, they get punished.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Damien

AS SOON AS ASHTON called, I knew.

The bones in the body knew. My twisted heart fucking *knew*.

"Quinlan has escaped."

He was given one simple instruction. Before Quinlan *moved in* with us, we told him she is to never leave our penthouse. Ever. For nothing.

He and Shawna were the only ones allowed in. No one else was supposed to see her face. Out of the question.

For her own safety and for our peace of mind.

We couldn't trust anyone. Other than these two people, we had to keep her identity a secret. Ashton and Shawna were vetted after a grueling, thorough background check. NDAs were signed. They were good to go.

That first time they were there was smooth sailing.

Today turned out to be an entirely different story.

To say we're disappointed in Ashton would be the understatement of the century.

Rome and Liam wanted to be here. More like, Rome wanted to kill Ashton for letting this happen. But before I hauled ass out of the office, I told them I'd talk to her today.

As in talk-talk.

First, though, I have to calm both her and my goddamn self.

“Mmm-mm-mm!” Quinlan wiggles between me and my SUV. Her hot breath tickles my palm as she screams into it.

Her tongue is sweet on my skin when she licks me. Her teeth are sweeter.

As sweet as she is, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m two seconds from losing it.

She was going to see Rex.

“You think you deserve to be let go?” The fear I still feel turns me into a raging psycho. I’m aware. Can’t control it. “You risked yourself. You fucking risked yourself, Quinlan. Rome was clear about what happens if you’re being reckless with our property.”

More screaming. More wiggling. She must be drawing attention, no matter how hard I pin her to the SUV’s door and shield her with my body.

See if I give a fuck. I’ll destroy anyone who comes close.

Like he could’ve destroyed her.

“You think…” We’re in the middle of the street. I snatched her over to the side. My hard cock presses between ass cheeks. “You think you’ve earned your freedom?”

“Sir, what’s going on here?” A man’s voice at my side.

He isn’t wearing a police uniform.

He’s worse than a cop. His phone is in his hand, and he’s close.

Quinlan’s face and the location we’re at would be all over the internet.

Woman kidnapped in broad daylight.

Rex wouldn’t need to use his connections in the force to take her away from us. The internet trolls will do that for him.

I’m in no mood to charm anyone. Problem is, this wannabe vigilante with his phone is forcing my goddamn hand.

“She’s my…” *My wife*. She is, even though it can’t be proved. Neither of us has a ring on, and I doubt he’ll count my scar as one. He’ll be even more suspicious then. “She’s my girlfriend.”

He blatantly ignores me. Lifts the phone higher. “Miss, are you okay?”

Nosy fucker. I remove my palm from her mouth. Turn her to him, hugging her to me. I grin at the balding idiot who dares meddling in my business.

“This is a game.” When I pin her harder to my cock, Quinlan gasps. It’s a pleasured one, she can’t help it. I won’t complain, especially since it works in my favor. “We’re playing, aren’t we, darling?”

Her desire to break free is so overwhelming that I feel it through our clothes. Every breath. Every thought. The subtlest movement.

I. Feel. Her.

“Yes, honey.” Her voice is sickly sweet. Venomous. No one would pick up on the underlying annoyance in it other than Rome, Liam and me. No one. “I’m sorry you had to witness it, sir.”

The man’s unsure. Uncomfortable. A beat passes. He’s still looking at her, searching for signs of distress.

All I can think of is *Take your filthy eyes off what’s mine*.

That’s not the whole truth, though, is it? I’m not just mad. I’m throbbing.

Her legs would spread for me if I bent her over right now. A little spit, some stretching with my fingers, and I’d be able to push into her ass.

Sure, it’d hurt. Granted, every prick on the street would have front row seats to our show. But it’ll be worth it.

She’d cry. She’d beg for my forgiveness for running off and risking her life.

“Okay.” The stranger glares at me, judgmental as all fuck. “Okay.”

That’s it. He turns his back to us, and I haul Quinlan up in my arms. Her feet go up in the air.

“Damien, I—” Her hands rise to stop me. I still throw her into the passenger seat. She pushes the door open, her eyes mad.

I’m not having it as I glower at her. “Little captive.”

“No.”

I shove her inside, slamming the door in her face. She punches the window, and I smile at her. Cross my arms over my chest.

Her hands go to the handle, shaking it from the inside. When she realizes it’s locked, as does the window, she flattens her hands to the glass.

“Let me out.”

The smart thing to do would be to go inside the car and drive straight home. Away from prying eyes. Away from people who might record our interaction.

Then again…I’m a sick fuck. And she’s safe, in a way. The windows are tinted. People who aren’t as close as I am wouldn’t see her.

I do. I walk closer, casting my shadow over her.

Her gray eyes widen. “I was on my way to—”

“You’ve forgotten your place.” I can’t help it; I put my hands parallel to hers. “Good thing I’m here to remind you.”

Her lips part, eyebrows knitting, she's adorable. And I don't feel like playing anymore. It's time I have her. It's fucking time I told her I've never been this worried in my life.

My heart goes wild in my chest. She could've been taken.

I'm inside the car, both my hands on the wheel.

"What the actual fuck, Quinlan." We blend into traffic.

He could've hurt her.

Her hand wraps around my arm, fingers digging into my suit jacket. "You have to let me go to him."

Him. I know who *him* is.

"First of all, fuck no." My hardened gaze meets hers. Back to the road.

"You can't lock me up forever." She leans over me, her hand stretching to the *unlock* button at my side. The one she forgot about when I surprised her by throwing her in here.

"Sit back down." Unfortunately for her, I know every single pleasure point in her body. I move a hand off the wheel to pinch her nipple. Twist it, then brush the hardened peak between my fingers.

It helps that she's not wearing a bra.

It also upsets me to no end that she went out into the street like that. Where the rest of the world got a glimpse of what's ours.

"Please, stop." She's sighing at my touch, her frantic movements slowing.

"Sit back down," I repeat.

We're at a red light, which allows me to take her hand in mine, suck on her middle finger. I push it into her mouth and thank fuck, that does it. She leans back to settle in her seat.

"You're cheating," she whispers when I tug on her wrist.

"I'm a lawyer." I open the button of her jeans and shove her wet fingers beneath the waistline of her panties. "I manipulate the system for a living."

Good fucking God, now I'm jealous of her fingers. Jealous and turned on.

"Rub yourself. Make it feel good and don't you dare stop." We're driving again, the damn road demanding my attention. "You were going to see Rex? Why the fuck would you do that?"

Betrayal. I hate the notion. Resent it.

Quinlan didn't run off to warn Rex. She couldn't have.

She's been acting strange when she thinks we're not watching. Her lips curl in disgust as she stares out the window. She tugs on her hair while she

works. Yesterday, when I spied on her from my office, a single tear rolled down her cheek. She swiped at it fast.

I caught her regardless.

Her moans suck me back to the present moment.

“Enough.” I curl my fingers around her wrist, tugging on it.

The car is filled with the scent of her arousal. What an absolute agony it is to stay focused on the road, to not get down on my knees and lick it off her.

I need her to talk. I need that more than I need to make her come, and that’s saying a lot.

“Rex,” I grit out, sounding like the kid I was eons ago.

The boy who snapped at the sight of his foster siblings’ bleeding abdomen. At their tears.

Quinlan didn’t hurt anyone. Least of all me.

That sobers me right the fuck up.

“What were you thinking, going there on your own?” Softness seeps into my voice. A sliver of it, anyway.

The valet in our building walks up to us. I roll the window down. One stern *no* from me, and he’s back to his station. He won’t get to smell her cunt. She’s ours.

“I hate him.” Her cheek is pressed to the car seat, tired eyes searching mine as I drive to my parking spot. “I had to tell him I hate him. Scream at him. In his face. He needs to hear how much I hate him.”

“Because of everything he’d done to you?” I slam the brakes harsher than necessary.

Narcissistic fuck. He’s hurt her *that* bad.

I’m going to gut him. I planned on a little knife play, tit for tat, before I slashed his throat and was done with him. He won’t get off that easy now. For all the years I wasn’t there for Quinlan. For the childhood he stole from her. For the guilt he’s planted in her head. He and her toxic fucking parents are dead.

“No, Damien.” Her fingertips land ever-so-lightly on my cheek. Her gray eyes glisten. “For what he’s done to *you*.”

My scruff is far too rough for such delicate fingers. She deserves better. So much better.

She’s never getting it. All she has is me.

“Damien.” This plea. She’s asking me for something.

For the truth. My truth.

If there was ever a moment to tell her what happened to me, this is it. We're both exposed nerves. Me from worrying about her. Her, so beautiful with her anger and her sense of mission.

Rex's days on this planet are numbered. Numbered as in two more weeks. She could run off again during that time.

She could stop believing me during those two weeks.

Unless I said something.

"Shh." I plant a kiss on her knuckles, placing her hand down at her side.

My lips curve up, an attempt at pacifying her.

Her pout and the pain that bleeds from her hurt me more than anything.

Failing her hurts. Not to my ego. It's my goddamn soul that's crumbling within me.

This. Isn't. The. Place. I can't hug her the way I want. Can't look into her eyes and then spank her if she pities me.

"Damien, what's going on?"

She didn't pity Rome. Didn't pity Liam. If I give her a reason to feel sorry for me, she'll take it. Quinlan will give me what she thinks I need.

Her pity won't just wound me. That shit will stay with her and end up coming between us.

Unacceptable.

"I'm fine." My fingers snap around her wrist faster and harder than I've ever held her before. Her pulse roars beneath the pads of my fingers. Fear. *Good*. I'll soothe her again later. I'll always find ways to bring her peace.

"Stay where you are."

"Okay."

My body goes on autopilot, overriding my need to hug and kiss and fuck her. I don't tear at the buttons of my shirt, baring my soul to her. My scarred skin.

I do none of that, nor do I try to appease her by smiling or cracking a joke.

She's there with her arms open when I open the passenger door. She loves the monster. Loves three of them. And this particular monster carries her home.

We're quiet on the ride up to the penthouse, on our walk to the kitchen.

The knife block comes to view, and I grab one before returning my arm to where it belongs. Right there around Quinlan.

Liam talked to her about his past in the dark. Rome had the punching bag.

The knife is what *I* need.

“Where’s Ashton?” she asks as I climb the stairs.

A dry laugh. “You’re not asking about the knife?”

“No.” Her chin dips, her gaze darting to her stomach and back to me. She thinks she’s the one who’ll have her skin broken in return for a peek into my soul. So sweet. So. Sweet. “I wonder what happened to Ashton. You didn’t kill him, right? It was my fault.”

“You’d like that.” The corner of my mouth lifts despite the heaviness in my heart. “That I’d kill someone for you.”

“No.”

She’s such a liar. I’ll let her have this one. “We had him fired.”

“What?” Quinlan tightens her grip on me, her face blanching. “He couldn’t have stopped me. I tricked him, then sprinted out of here. Please, Damien, be reasonable.”

“I’m anything but reasonable when it comes to your safety.” I glower at her while I’m crossing the hallway to my room. “He fucked up royally. We paid him a decent severance package on top of what the building management offered. Hush money. But he won’t be working here anymore.”

“Please—”

“Rex could’ve taken you from us. Could’ve done worse if he realized you loved us.”

“It’s my fault.”

“Enough.”

“Damien…”

“Enough.”

“Fine.”

I throw the knife on the mattress at a safe distance from us so it won’t hurt Quinlan when I place her on the bed.

Her arms cross over her stomach as soon as she’s seated there, fingers hooking into the hem of her top.

“Keep it on.” My teeth sink into my bottom lip, my head shaking. She’s gorgeous in her eagerness. With the button of her jeans open and the zipper pulled down. “For now.”

Her gaze shifts to the knife. When she’s staring at me again, questions fill her eyes.

“Just listen, darling.” I arrange her so she’s seated on her knees in the center of the bed, the knife at her side. I’m on my knees before her, pressing a finger to tip her chin up. “Can you do that for me?”

“Anything.” The fire in her eyes is mesmerizing. Liam would’ve gotten lost in her gaze. I sure as shit am on my way. “I don’t even know what he did, and I wanted to hurt him. Damien, I wanted to kill him. With you. For all the days and weeks and months that I wasn’t there for you. I haven’t had the best life, but I’ve been fine. I’ve been ignorant and privileged. No one laid a finger on me, while you’ve been out there. Carrying the pain by yourself. You had your friends, but I should’ve been there. I should’ve asked for your forgiveness. I shouldn’t have loved Rex. You were just a boy. You, Laurel and Jagger. He had no right.”

Her voice cracks at the end, splintering into a million pieces.

“Listen to me.”

My heart beats louder than it ever had. I ignore it, never loosening the grip on her chin. The pain and guilt eat her up from the inside, and screw that. If anything’s going to terrorize Quinlan, it’s us.

“Yes?”

“To say you lived an ignorant and privileged life is a fucking joke.” I shove one sleeve of my jacket off my shoulder. I release her for the second it takes me to shrug the other one off. Her chin is tipped up by my fingers again. “You’ve lived with guilt, with the responsibilities that have been shoved down your throat for years. He guilted you into believing it’s okay for a kid to carry these burdens on her own. Poisoned you for years.”

“So what?” Quinlan is exquisite. Rome’s thunderstorms flash behind her eyes. Liam’s fire is there, too. Both my friends’ personalities are embedded in her. As well as my sickness. “So fucking what, Damien? It was nothing. It was nothing compared to what you must’ve been through.”

“So what? That’s what you’re asking me?” With my hands on her shoulders, I force her down, ass to her heels. “We talked about this. During all this time he’d been brainwashing you, did he ever stop to mention he had foster kids?”

Her eyebrows shoot down. Her head shakes.

“That’s right.” The buttons of my shirt slide out of their loops one by one, from top to bottom. I’m hyper-aware of the fact that I don’t have an undershirt beneath it. Everything hurts, and I don’t stop. “Now you do. You couldn’t have done anything back then.”

Her throat bobs as she gulps. Her eyes never leaving mine. “Okay.”

“Jagger Powell. Laurel Lambert. Me. We were his first and only foster kids.”

Her hands cover mine at the last button. Gripping me instead of comforting me.

“We couldn’t escape his cruelty.” My vision blurs at the edges as memories slam into me. I shake them off. “There was no running from it. Nowhere to hide when Rex decided we deserved a kick in the gut or a punch to the ribs. When he escalated and had Harlow hold us down.”

She doesn’t resist me when I flip my hands, grasp her wrists and lower her arms to her sides.

“Quinlan.”

“Yes?”

“This is why they held us down.”

She stares at me as I rip my shirt off my body. There’s no pity as she examines my scars. There’s strength. There’s love. Devotion, even.

“You cut me the other day.” There’s a question in her whisper. “You let me cut you. Are you okay? You could’ve said no. You didn’t have to do it.”

“I was aching for it,” I answer, knowing full well what I’m about to ask of her is going to be far more intense than anything we’ve ever done. Knowing how ready I am. “That was love. That was bonding. It had nothing to do with torture and pain. There was nothing ugly about it.”

“Okay.” Her resolution makes her features harden. “Okay.”

“Jagger and Laurel have those too. I couldn’t always save them.”

Nothing. She offers me nothing other than her touch. Every patch of skin, or pink and white scar tissue that Quinlan caresses, hurts. Hurts so bad. My abs flex, but I don’t want to flinch from her. I memorize the feel of her fingertips on me. The way she explores my body.

“You did your best.” She leans in, her lips pursed to kiss my abdomen. My scars.

The stark reminder of what happened when I wasn’t strong enough. When I was at an overwhelming disadvantage against Rex.

The marks I have to stare at every day. The marks I don’t want on me anymore.

“Don’t.” My hand wraps around the side of her neck.

When I tip her face up with my free hand, the air gets knocked out of my lungs.

“What’s this?” My tone is taunting, even though I’m struggling to breathe. I tighten my grip around her, using her to remind myself I’m not that kid anymore. I can protect her. I always will. “You’re angry.”

“Told you,” she grits out, feral. “I went out there to…” A rugged breath escapes her. It’s a challenge for her, to talk while my fingers bite into her skin. Her eyes shine brighter. “I ran away so I could kill him. He’s a monster. He hurt you.”

“I didn’t tell you what he did to me.” There’s no need to ask if Rome or Liam said anything. My trust in them is absolute. “What makes you think it was that bad?”

One of her eyebrows quirks. Her hands are on my thighs, nails digging into me. I groan at the exquisite pain. I’m hard. So fucking hard. I also don’t forget she owes me something.

I tug on this beautiful girl’s hair. “Answer me.”

“Not the specifics. You didn’t have to.” Quinlan’s confident as she slides one hand up blindly. She avoids my crotch, stops above my belt, her fingertips skimming the bottom of my scars. “You’ve given me all of you. Your friendly side. Your twisted side. The depraved side. All of you. Except your abdomen. You only took your shirt off when it was dark, when I had my back to you. Liam or Rome have been careful too. That’s how I knew it was bad.”

“That’s it?” I trust that she’s not lying to me. That she’s believed me just because, without explanations or sob stories. Christ, do I trust her. It also feels too good to be true. After being dismissed by the authorities so many times, this is too fucking good. “Me, hiding my abdomen? That’s all you needed to just”—I snap my fingers—“go after Rex? Your half-brother?”

“I. Believed. You.” There they are. These words. Her mouth saying them. I have to breathe through them. Have to breathe them. “From the very first day, I believed you. You didn’t have to convince me of anything. You didn’t have to show me this…” Her voice goes raspy, her teeth gnashing. “This horror that was done to you. Your underlying, never-ending pain was enough. And I fell for that side too. I *believed* you. Do you hear me? If not, I’ll repeat it. Today and for the rest of my life. I. Believed. You. I believe you, Damien Black.”

“Ms. Palmer.” The air in the room is filled with her. She’s everywhere, inside my lungs, curled around my heart. Under my skin. “You make it easy

to love you. Too goddamn easy. Are you trying to get back at me for fucking with your head? Is that it?"

"I was trying to kill him." Not her parents. Not the cops who took her parents' word and that of a weeping child that day in the pool. Kill Rex. For me. "Let's get out of here. Fuck the old plan. Let's finish him. Tonight. No one will ever find out. You have the money to cover it up. Please, I—"

"You what?" I release her hair and bend to pick up the knife. Her hand is already open when I shove the handle into it.

Her gray eyes become unfocused. When she's back looking at me and not into the void, she groans, "I'll die if we don't do it. It hurts. The guilt, it hurts."

"You'll die when I tell you to." With her hand in mine, I raise the blade to her eye level. "Which is fucking never."

"Damien."

She could ask me anything, and I'd do it. Anything at all, other than go over to Rex unprepared and risk having one of us go to prison. I can't be separated from her. I can't rob Laurel and Jagger from this revenge, either. I have to be as miserable as humanly possible until it's time.

"Tell me you understand."

"I understand."

"Good girl." That flush on her cheeks will never get old. "You want to help me, Quinlan?"

This is the most honest I've ever been with anyone. I'm at my rawest, my walls all but gone for her. My heart is as exposed as my scarred abdomen.

"Want to patch me up?"

"I want to kill—"

My thumb brushes her jawline, preparing her for what's next. "Cut me."

It feels like silence detonates in the room.

Minutes tick by, and then, "I think I misheard you, Damien."

"No, you heard me right." My lungs expand. My eyes move to the knife and back to her. "Cut me. Wound me. Slice through every scar. Every inch. Do it for me. Put me back together."

"No. No. Fuck you. Fuck *you* for asking me this." She's fighting my grip, trying to get rid of the knife. The anger tumbles out of her, too fast for me to stop. "What the—is this a test? One last trial to see if I'm on your side? You don't trust that I want to kill him, right? That's what this is. You think I'm

lying, that I ran away for good. Well, fuck you. The answer is no. The answer is—”

“*Fuck you*, yes. You were clear the first few times, darling.” Even with Rome’s intense training, I’m still stronger than her. The tip of the knife is pointed to the top edge of one of my scars, pressed to it. There are five in total. The rest have faded, thank fuck. “No, this isn’t a test. I have other creative ways to test your loyalty. Don’t need them. You saved me by being born. You could never hurt me, even when you hated me. I believe you just as much as you believe every word that comes out of my mouth.”

Her eyes narrow.

“You had my cock in your mouth, for one.” The corner of my mouth ticks up, though I don’t find anything amusing about this situation. “You could’ve bitten it off.”

She sinks her fingers into my thigh, groaning. “You didn’t fuck my mouth to test me.”

“True. I’m not testing you now.” The sting of the knife on my skin intensifies. I’m the one pushing it closer.

Until she gives in. Until she sees how much I need it.

“You’re going to cut me because I can’t bear having him on me a second longer.” The past isn’t there before my eyes. Quinlan’s here. Angry, beautiful Quinlan. Mine to protect. Mine to have. “You’re going to replace his scars because I need to have *you* there. I’ve never asked this from anyone. I’m asking this from you, and you’re not going to deny me this. You can’t.”

Any trace of hesitation is wiped off her face. Quinlan pulls her lips in.

“Okay.” The knife goes in. “Okay.”

Pleasure, pain, and righteousness burst inside me. My hand moves to cup the back of her neck, my eyes fixated on hers.

She’s determined, hellbent on fixing me like I asked her to. With confident movements, she peels away the past off me. Blood begins to trickle from that first cut, dripping to the waistline of my pants.

“I love you.” Her tongue is warm on my abdomen. She laps at the trail of blood, bottom to top, gazing at me.

Red paints Quinlan’s lips, her tongue. I swear I can see some of it in her eyes.

“I love you.” I pin her face to my broken skin. “Suck, Quinlan. Do better. Suck it.”

Her mouth purses and she does as I said. My cock jerks and it's a heady feeling, how much I want to fuck her. How I want to love her for the rest of my life.

"Good girl."

Pulling her off me hurts on a visceral level. I mask it by hardening my expression. By talking to her while she repeats the motions of cutting me. She's so focused, so mesmerizing, as she gets rid of Rex and replaces his memory with hers.

"Be a good girl for me. Don't stop. All five of them." She nods at my orders, cutting me open. Licking me. "You're doing so well. So goddamn well. You're not hurting me. You could never. Fuck. It makes me hard, how fierce you are. How ruthless. Good girl."

"I love you." She licks me. Sucks me.

Slices another line on my abdomen.

"I love you." Her lips kiss the gash, her tongue laves at it.

The more I bleed for her, the more I love her. That shouldn't be possible. No one can claim they love a person more than they love themselves, only to realize there's more love to give to them. Only to find out that they're falling into a bottomless pit.

"I love you, Damien."

"I love you, Quinlan."

The drop is endless. I wasn't imagining it. The longest leap anyone's ever taken.

"I love you," she says for the fifth and last cut.

I'm an impatient bastard, shoving her mouth to my open wound. I'm high on the moment. I'm cured. Fixed. I'll kill Rex, no doubt about that. But this…

My God. Fuck.

"Look at you." With my hand tight around her, I slide her mouth up and down the length of the wound, my cock straining for her. "I should've done this earlier. Fuck, so much earlier."

Quinlan quivers in my firm grip. Tears brim in her eyes, and when she blinks, they break free. Fat, clear droplets cascade down her cheeks.

And her mouth. It gapes, taking more of me. But this isn't about sucking my blood. I can see it before she completely breaks down. Then I hear it.

The most tortured sound I've ever heard in my life.

My heart splits. Splinters. There's nothing left of it, it's all broken.

Because she hurts worse than I ever have. Worse than I ever will.

This has been too much for her. Too much that she's screaming and crying, throwing the knife away to cling onto my thighs for dear life.

Liam's scars are different. They weren't put there by Quinlan's half-brother. She doesn't blame herself for them.

She blames herself for mine. Even though none of this is her fault, the guilt is there. She feels responsible because he's her family. Because she could've gone to the cops, and she didn't.

Of course she fucking didn't. She couldn't have known. It wouldn't have helped anyway.

I'll die before I let her suffer for a crime she never committed. I'll work hard to erase this guilt from her already burdened conscience. For as long as I live, I'll be that person for her.

"You're brave." I pull her off me by her arms, moving us carefully to the pillows.

She keeps screaming, curling into a little ball in my arms. Wailing and crying. Gazing up at me. Her eyes scream the words she can't say.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

"The bravest person I've ever met."

My hand doesn't tremble as I brush a lock of hair behind her ear. As I wipe the tears that won't stop coming. As I thumb the heart tattoo on her cheek. The fresh wounds on my stomach don't even register. She doesn't notice my blood soaking into her clothes, either.

"You did this. You fixed me. Look at me, bleeding for you, darling." I kiss her forehead, run my hands through her hair like she likes. Nothing helps. She's a trembling mess. *My* trembling mess. "Rex is gone. He's not a part of my body anymore. Of my soul. You've done that, beautiful girl. I had no doubt you could do it. I'm so proud of you. So proud."

Blood runs down my stomach, and I'm the one comforting her. I'm the one whispering to her just how much I love her. How much I need her to come back to me.

But for all the love I shower her with, she doesn't stop crying. I made Quinlan go through what Rex did to me when he ripped me open and I'm not sorry. I am aware of the toll it's taken on her.

It was important for her to go through it, though. Just as important. She needed her guilt brought to the surface so I could take it away. Me.

And that's exactly what I do.

Gentle love and sweet reassurances fail me and her. She understood why I asked her to do it ten minutes ago. She's past logic now. Past explanations. She's stuck in her head, and I need her back here.

I shove her to the side, softly, gently. She pins herself to my body, burying her face in my chest. Her shoulders don't stop shaking. Her screams burn through my skin.

They're a distraction. The sound of my belt buckle doesn't register. Nor does that of my zipper. I take my cock out, and with my hand in Quinlan's hair, I pull her toward my lap by the roots.

If my words fail to reach her, stuffing her mouth with me will have to do that.

"Come here." I hold the base to her lips.

Tears and sobs and screams continue to rip from her when I hold my hard length inches from her mouth. The tip is wet and I'm throbbing for her.

And she's lost. So lost.

"I said come here." Her screaming turns into deep breaths. She lets me move her. "That's a good girl. Open up."

Her lips part, and I push her down on me.

"That's it. That's it. Stay there."

Quinlan's mouth is full of my cock. Her lips stretch around me. Her tears leak on my groin, on my balls, my thighs in a steady rhythm.

I stroke her hair without letting up on the pressure on her head.

"You're safe, darling. I'm safe. Calm down." My order affects her. Her throat relaxes around me. "You're doing so well. Breathe, Quinlan. You have my blood inside you. You have Rome and Liam and me on every inch of your skin. You're strong enough. Ruthless enough to carry through this. You've been that woman for years. Always growing. Always evolving. This is all you. We're here for when things get too hard. Use me, darling. Use my cock. Take it. Take everything until you're back here with me."

Her tears dry while I talk. Her tongue is hot, resting on my throbbing length.

We spend minutes like that. Together. Bonding.

I don't know how many of those have passed when the gray in her eyes darkens.

"There she is." I rearrange Quinlan so she's not lying on the bed, but on her hands and knees between my legs. My hand reaches lower, fingers slipping into her pussy. Curling inside her. "Good girl. You did so well.

You'll do this one more thing for me, won't you? Come with your pretty lips wrapped around my cock."

Her shuddered breaths vibrate on my dick.

I curse. "Yes, you will."

My fingers explore and stroke, rubbing and pinching her clit. Stroking fast then slow. Quinlan's moans and the sight of her ass up in the air carry me toward the edge. Closer and closer to emptying myself in her mouth.

"Come for me." I touch her the way she loves. The way that turns her into a whimpering, trembling girl. Our girl. "Come on my fingers. Fuck, you're there, aren't you? You feel so good on my cock. You feel even better when you make a mess of my fingers."

Her muscles tense at my words, her moans nothing but gasps of pleasure. She's panting on my cock, her body rippling as she orgasms. As she pushes me off the cliff to keep falling with her. *For* her.

"Ah, fuck." I finish in her mouth and it's so good.

I don't force her to swallow. I don't care that some drips back on my thighs. Down her chin.

She's better now. Nothing else matters.

We did this, her smile says.

You did this, I tell her through my touch. By folding her naked body in my arms, settling her in my lap.

Her head rests on my shoulder. My blood is all over her.

I'm shackled to her, Rome and Liam for life, and here's the fucking irony.

This is the freest I've ever felt.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Quinlan

SUNSET ARRIVES TOO EARLY. Gorgeous shades of orange and red cast the buildings in the distance in a warm glow. They play along the waters of the Chicago River.

The world outside my window is beautiful. My life is beautiful.

I should be happy. Pleased. Content.

I have everything I've ever dreamed of. I earn more than enough to help my family. I don't have to pull endless all-nighters to support them. My men forbade me from taking on new clients, even though I'm almost done with their website.

And even though my parents haven't replied to any of my emails, I'm not worried about them. My men have someone looking after them. Rex does the rest.

As of two days ago, there are no more secrets between Damien and me. The last barrier that's been standing between the four of us is gone.

Justice will be served. I'll take part in it. They promised.

Life is as it should be.

Except me. I can't get over the stories Liam, Rome, and Damien shared with me.

This again? my head asks, reproaching me. *All of this will be done soon. Snap out of it.*

Being content when your heart is a rotten, black organ kind of makes it impossible to see the good in this life.

This firsthand knowledge is heavy. So heavy. Every minute of every day has been filled with small deaths. *My* small deaths.

They have no idea I'm going through this. That once more, I'm pretending to be fine.

For their sakes. I've been smiling wide for the camera on my laptop. For the three of them at night, when they'd come home from work. I'm never hungry anymore, but I eat, for Rome.

The only time I'm even slightly relieved is during my boxing lessons. When they fuck me. Defile me. Rail into me. My heart doesn't hurt as much when my body does.

Like it does now.

My laptop is open, so I have to rein in my gag reflex at a repulsive thought that pops into my head. Rex and I are blood related.

Jesus Christ.

We'll get them, little flame, I remind myself of Liam's words.

Of Rome's. *He needs to suffer some more, sweetheart. Him and Aria. Give it time. We promise you it'll be worth it.*

We're making him wait like Jagger and Laurel and I had, darling. Damien, being so fucking reasonable. *We knew pain would come and the fucker would stretch the fear out before he went at us. We have to wait.*

I slam my laptop shut. Groan into the empty room. Grind my teeth. Press my knuckles to my eyes.

The three faces I love flash behind my closed eyes. Rome's scowl. Damien's hint of wicked amusement. Liam's stoic expression, the fire in his eyes.

Deep breath.

Better. Much.

Bzz.

A message from Anne. It's like she could sense I've been desperate for a friendly face. The photo she sent me is of her, flaunting her new business license. *Dayton Marketing Solutions*, the paper in her hands, says. Dayton, as in Nick's and her last name.

My fingers fly across the screen on their own, typing to Anne how excited I am for her. How proud I am to have such a badass sister-in-law and a friend.

The phone buzzes again the moment I hear a low swooshing sound behind me. I put it down and spin on my chair in time to catch Rome, then Damien, then Liam filtering through the sliding bookshelf.

They couldn't have been more handsome if they tried. Dark suits. Heated glares. Their lips pursed into a straight line.

Not a word. They say nothing as they form a circle around me, watching me, seeing through my white T-shirt and pale jeans. They see my heart.

The beginning of relief. That's what it feels like. Metaphorical hands reaching into my heart and ripping away the pain.

My eyelashes flutter. This is more than just relief. This is longing. I'll never have it any other way.

"You're back early."

Their jackets go on the floor. Sleeves rolling up their forearms.

"This doesn't sound like *good evening, I'm so glad you're home*." Rome's hand sinks into my hair, my locks fisted in his tight grip. He yanks on it, tilting my head to the side. His face lowers to mine. "We talked about this, did we not?"

"Ye—" The *'s'* is silenced by Rome's lips. By Rome's bruising, all-consuming kiss and how he uses my hair to pull me closer.

Two hands join him. Liam's thumb circles the tattoo on my cheek. He's not gentle, not just stroking me. He pushes me to the side, deeper into Rome's kiss.

Damien pinches my nipple through my shirt. Without a bra on, his fingers inflict pain. A glance his way, and I'm calmer than I was a second ago. He's enjoying this, my pain. And I love that.

"Well?" Liam's fingers move to my chin, stealing me from Rome. "Let's hear it."

His intense glare and low voice set me on fire. Even the lock of hair that falls on his forehead doesn't make him look younger or sweet. He's deadly, and he wants me.

Only me.

I start talking. He doesn't care to hear it anymore. He's ruthless as Rome was as he crushes his mouth to mine, tilting my head so he could fuck my mouth with his tongue. He licks me. Tastes me. Possesses me.

My eyes roll to the back of my head, and I gasp into his mouth. I reach for his scar and stroke it, grasp for it, caress it. I need him as much as he needs me. I need that manly, delicious groan from him.

Wetness pools between my thighs. My nipples are pulled tight, and Damien them. The roots of my hair burn, and it sets off more pleasure within me. More desire.

“Next time.” Damien’s fingers wrap around my arms, hauling me to my feet, pressing me to him. His sapphire eyes are dark, the shadows of scruff beneath his high cheekbones darker. “We won’t be so gentle. We’ll edge you, but you won’t get to come. We’ll give you a week of that.”

We’re playing a game. I fucking love our games. My heart isn’t as heavy when he’s like this.

“Denied orgasms?” My indignation is fake. His eyes glint anyway. “You would never—”

Damien is the third man to shut me up this evening. His teeth sink into my bottom lip, his satisfied grunt reverberating on my skin. He bites me harder, and I moan from how good the pain feels. From the taste of my own blood.

His fingers glide to the sides of my neck, his cock hard against my stomach. When I reach down to grab him, Damien breaks our kiss.

“Why?” I’m asking in the room in general. They really mean it. They’ll deny me orgasms. They can’t. I have to have this blinding, mind-numbing escape from reality. I have to have them. “You said next time.”

“Might’ve changed my mind.” Damien swipes his tongue over his lips, licking my blood off him.

“He didn’t.” Liam’s hand is at the small of my back. “You’ll have your orgasms today.”

I look up at him, and there are no embers in those eyes. The black pushes the color out.

“But?”

Rome’s at the door, his expression promising bad things. The worst things.

“We haven’t had dinner yet.” He beckons me to him, though it’s unnecessary. Liam’s pushing me in his direction. Toward the open door. “We’re starving.”

We. Not *you haven’t eaten*. This isn’t Rome.

“Oh, and Quinlan?” Damien curls his fingers around my wrist.

“Yes?”

“This won’t be like our other dinners. Nothing like it.” As I’m walking, he brings my middle finger to his mouth. Sucks. Bites. At my surprised

yelp, he chuckles. “We’re going to play with our food this evening.”

Their bodies are an open book to me, and each gesture, each mimic, is a sign. An omen. This is going to hurt. A lot.

Instead of pushing them off me, instead of fighting to save myself, I allow them to lead me down the stairs. Toward the dining area.

We stop at the concrete slab dining table. Damien was right. This isn’t like any other dinner. There’s no food on the table. Not a single plate or a glass. Nothing other than a black candlestick in the center that houses a red candle.

Flick. Snap. Flick. Snap.

Liam’s stealthy. I haven’t realized he’s holding his Zippo. He’s here, all-powerful and gorgeous, commanding the lighter in his hand.

I admire Liam. How he conquered his trauma. Flipped it on itself and turned it into his ally.

Into something sexual.

“Curious, little flame?” His voice is thick with lust. With authority.

The shiver coursing through me is all I have. All he needs. It’s the *yes* my mouth can’t articulate.

I can’t stop staring at him. He’s painstakingly hot. His intensity is a live thing, searing my skin. Sending heat down between my legs.

Rome heads over to the fridge, and while I miss him, I’m also drawn to Liam’s thumb. The subtle, familiar slide of it along Zippo’s wheel and the flame that flickers there. It dances for him in the low light in the apartment, then it’s gone.

He grabs the candlestick and stalks off without another word.

I’m a ball of nervous energy and dark, depraved desires. I’m the embodiment of need. Of love. Of cravings.

“We could’ve fucked you here.” Damien’s lips are in my ear from behind me as he tugs the shirt off my body. “But formalities are overrated. We’re having dinner in the living room.”

Rome returns to us, rounding me. Facing me.

“That’s so you won’t starve until the actual dinner.” There’s a strawberry between his fingers, the fruit as red as his raw knuckles. He tips my face up to him. “And no. I don’t consider my cum as food.”

That’s the only warning I get.

His thumb forces my bottom lip down and the strawberry into my mouth. His jaw tics when it remains stuck there. Now that they’re here, I’m in a

playful mood. Nothing hurts anymore, and I keep my teeth clenched.

"Open up." His harsh tone and the second push of the strawberry do it. I give him what he wants, letting him shove the strawberry past my lips. "Good girl. Good fucking girl, sweetheart. Chew."

Juice explodes in my mouth, trickling down my chin. It's unnatural to eat it with Rome holding my lip like that. He doesn't seem to mind, cleaning my chin just to rub it against my tongue. He groans, then sets to removing my jeans and panties.

He's at his full height again, large hands cupping either side of my neck while Damien strokes my waist, the swells of my breasts.

Rome tilts his head. "You've been bad."

The depths in his eyes are my undoing. My mind goes blank. "Me?"

"Yes, you, sweetheart. You can't hide anything from us. Haven't you realized it by now?" He releases me, holding one of my hands. The other is in Damien's as they guide me to the living room where Liam waits. "But that's okay. We don't mind leaving work early for you. We'll always do that."

"You didn't have to—"

"Yes, we do." Damien pinches one of my nipples, hard. "We're going to fuck the sadness out of you."

My heart stutters to a stop. I've been doing so well. At least that's what I thought. They see me, these men. They always do.

They came home early to kiss it better.

"By the end of the night, that shit will leave your body." I'm pliant, nothing but a beating heart for Damien to manhandle as he wishes. He cradles me into his arms, his jaw strong on our way to the living room. "It's not a request anymore. It's an order."

Once we're there, he takes me to the floor, flips on his back and arranges me on top of him. I'm on all fours, straddling his legs. Liam takes the spot before me, his hand on my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

"We won't ask again." Flames flicker in Liam's eyes, but they remain as dark as before. Everything about him is dark. Every part of him is powerful.

Not just him. All of them.

Before I say a single thing, I get to work on Damien's shirt. My marks are on him. Mine. No one stops me as I rip the buttons one by one, then push his undershirt up his torso.

Our scars are staring at each other. Our gazes collide.

His hands are on my cheeks, softness flickering in his eyes. It'll be gone in the next second. Nothing about this night screams *softness*. "Better, darling?"

"Much."

"You haven't been, though." Rome's palm squeezes my ass.

A moan escapes from the firm contact. "I'm fine."

"Liar."

He spanks me for it. Once, twice, three times. Another three with the rugged back of his hand.

The humiliation doesn't end there. He goes on, growing more ruthless when I cry out. The others don't tell him it's enough.

They know how much I love the pain. How it heals the broken parts of me.

"You're not fine, but it's okay." Damien lowers my body to his while Liam watches us. His teeth clamping on my nipple sends another jolt of pain through me. A soothing pain. "Liam came up with a way to take care of your predicament."

"We'll play again once you're truly better. Once you stop carrying this burden by yourself." Liam bends to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. The candle in his grip is burning. The flame casts a soft glow on his scar and fuck, he's gorgeous. Intimidating and hot. "You'll let out those tears, Quinlan. You will, then we'll take care of the rest. You won't cry over this"—he emphasizes the word, because *this* isn't one thing, it's all of it —"ever again."

"I'm dying, Liam." By staying here. By not making a move on them.

"You'll live." Rome spreads my ass cheeks, revealing the most private parts of me to him. His gaze scalds me, though I can't see him looking. I do feel the things he's doing to me, how he spits on my tightest hole, his finger circling the wet, sensitive rim. "It's a matter of days. A matter of patience."

"This isn't even about them anymore." One of Damien's hands holds the side of my neck, the other one unbuckling his belt. "This is about you being a good girl and doing as you're told."

"It's about us getting off on punishing you." Rome adjusts my hips, sliding me up and down on the tip of Damien's cock. My lips part for him, and it's so hot the way his cock throbs inside me. The way Rome handles me. "Just because."

“Oh, fuck. You’re soaked.” Damien lets out a virile, desperate moan. His jaw locks, his hands finding my hips, and then I’m all the way down. Impaled on his cock, struggling to catch my breath, I feel *everything*. “You’re so good. Except it’s not enough to make it up to us.”

“Hold her in place,” Liam orders while I’m still thinking about how to answer Damien. “Steady.”

Damien and Rome listen. I’m there, pinned to Damien’s body, held down by Rome’s hands.

“Good.” Liam’s shadow disappears. He isn’t leaving, though—oh, no. He walks to my side, his fingertips lighting up the nerve endings on my back. “You’ve taken wax to your beautiful skin before.”

“Yes.” It hurt, that day. It created a stronger bond between us.

His fingers go lower, tapping the top of my butt. “Flip her on her back.”

This single command has the men spinning me. My back is to the floor and Damien’s a beast on top of me. Rome gets on his knees near my face, his blue eyes watching me as he pushes his pants down, as he relieves his cock from his boxer briefs. He’s throbbing, big, and a drop of precum wets the tip.

But he won’t fuck my face. He’ll wait. Liam is on his knees at my side, and his candle is going to mark me.

“Don’t hold back on your screams, darling.” Rome strokes himself, his hand gliding over the ridges of his length.

“I’d take that any day over your silence.” Damien rubs my clit, being soft. Purposefully so, to torture me.

“Please.” I sink my heels to the floor, attempting to rock myself against him. Encouraging him to shove himself into me. For any of them to do it.

“Not yet.” With a hand on my navel, he pushes me down.

“Please, fuck me.” My eyes fly between the three of them. “You’re torturing me. It’s not fair. It’s the worst. Please.”

Liam proves me wrong. Shows me it can in fact get worse when a drop of red wax lands between my breasts. Pain slices through me, and while I won’t die from it, it hurts. It’s so good.

“Pain can come in different ways.” Liam’s thumb rubs the wax into my skin when the second drop splashes on the spot right above it.

“Liam,” I grit out, staying in the moment. Staying with the pain.

“Good girl.” Rome slides a hand to cup the back of my neck, lifting my head up to smear his precum on my lips.

My attention splits between him and the wax on me. I'm being stretched and ripped and it's wonderful. My tongue darts out to taste him on my lips, on his cock.

Right when Liam tortures me with another stroke of wax on one of my breasts. A bigger drop, by the feel of it. The first tears leak out of the corners of my eyes, sliding down my temples and to the floor.

"You're beautiful like this." Damien rocks into me, just a little.

"That's it." I tilt my head to Liam. His lips quirk to the side in an evil smirk that reaches his eyes. He's been waiting for this, for the perfect moment. "That's better. You're being such a good girl, little flame. Taking it like the good fuck doll you are."

"This is the only pain you're allowed to feel. We'll take care of the rest for you, darling." Damien draws back, rocks his hips and isn't anywhere near enough. It'll only be enough when he splits me in half. "You'll have everything. There's no need to be sad. We've got you."

He's talking about how impatient I've been. How I do my best to carry the pain by myself. How I'm failing.

And how they understand.

"I get it." My hips lift. Damien's hand pushes me back down, his palm flat on my scars. "I get it."

"I believe you." Rome still holds my head up, his thumb caressing my cheek. "I'm not sure Liam does."

"I'm not sold, no." My other breast heats up as the wax makes contact again. And the other one, back and forth. On my navel. "Convince me, Quinlan."

I can't. My screams are being ripped from my chest.

Rome silences me, teasing my lips with his cock. Damien rocks in and out of me with more force. Liam's painting me in wax. One drop after the other, he goes lower down my body. Each one of them is a show of love. Of possession.

They're vicious. Focused. Gorgeous.

"Look at yourself." Rome's gentle as his thumb strokes the back of my head. He pulls back, lifting me higher. "Look at how beautiful you are."

Liam is silent as my eyes skim over the patches of red wax. I'm covered in it, down to the stripes where they marked me. *He* made me like this.

And he's watching me, his body brimming with curiosity as he waits for my reaction.

“I love it,” I say through the tears. “I’ve never felt more beautiful in my entire life. More seen.”

Liam’s face lights up, his satisfaction evident, even though he isn’t smiling. He puts a hand on Damien’s shoulder—a sign for him to start pummeling into me. Damien does exactly that, sitting on his knees, fucking me into the floor.

Another drop of wax lands on my navel.

Rome releases my head to the floor, but this isn’t an innocent gesture. I see where Liam’s going with this.

While Damien’s inside me, Liam spreads my pussy lips, splashing wax on my clit. It’s sadistic. It’s a turn on. The gesture is such an intimate one.

What a heady feeling it is, to be owned and loved like that.

“Fuck,” I scream, struggling to catch my breath.

“We aren’t anywhere near done with you.” Rome moves around me, his thighs bracketing my face. He shoves his cock inside me, fucking my mouth.

With his cock inside me, Liam’s wax on my body and Damien railing me, I unravel. I come, moan and gasp. I’m desperate for air. Choking harder on Rome. Damien’s hands are there too. Beneath my thighs, raising my body in an angle that allows for his cock to reach the deepest. Into my womb.

“You make me so hard.” Liam’s fingers are on my clit, rubbing the wax on it. Prolonging my orgasm. “The way you break for us. The way you never give up. Our plaything. Our everything. Ours.”

They keep doing that for long minutes. Rome’s eyes on mine, his palm on my cheek as he takes his pleasure from my mouth. Liam twists my clit between his fingers, his other hand palming my breast.

And Damien…

“I’m close.” Damien thickens inside me. I haven’t stopped coming. Or I did, and I’m coming again. That, too, hurts so good. “Such a good girl, squeezing me like that. Such a good. Fucking”—he lifts one ankle to his lips, bites—“girl. Begging me to put babies inside you.”

Damien sinks his teeth into my flesh and it sets off his orgasm. He curses, groans, and holds me tighter as he shoots his cum inside me.

My muffled scream is what does it to Rome. His hand is wrapped around my throat as he tells me, “Fuck, you feel good. Fuck, you’re perfect. Take all my cum, sweetheart. Yes, just like that. I want to see you swallow.”

I do, swallowing every drop down my throat. My lips are bruised, and my throat is tight, but I take all of it. Rome pulls out, tucks himself in and sits next to me.

“Beautiful.” He drags a finger over my wet chin, teasing my lips with his fingertip. I kiss him. “As beautiful as you were the first time the three of us used your pretty little body to get off.”

The dream from the other night. Me, waking up without my panties.

“What?” The word is garbled around Rome’s fingers.

“Please.” I’m empty and needy when Damien draws out of me. I miss him already when he tucks himself back into his boxer briefs and zips up. “Pretending you have no idea what we’re talking about.”

“Did you…” My speech is garbled from Rome’s finger in my mouth. He moves it to the side, keeping it in my mouth so I can talk. “Drug me?”

“You did. Sort of. The melatonin helped.” Liam’s between my thighs, spreading them. He’s fixated on my face while he drags my arousal and Damien’s cum from thighs. He groans when he pushes it back inside of me, his teeth grazing his bottom lip. “The rest was all you. You were so sweet that you let us.”

I want to say I didn’t *let* them do anything. I really didn’t. But how can I be mad at them? At the men I love? At the people who came to take me when I myself had no idea how badly I needed it?

I can’t. I won’t.

At least this time I’m awake for what they’re doing to me. I inch my legs wider for Liam, nodding my consent. It doesn’t matter that he doesn’t ask for it. I give it to him anyway.

He slams into me, his heated eyes going completely black.

“Goddamn it, Quinlan.” His breath is ragged.

His attention moves from my face down my wax covered body. Red. The color of blood. The color of war.

The color of love.

“Still so tight.” Liam’s thick cock stretches me, his fingers digging into my ass and holding it up. His cock thrusts ruthlessly into me while Rome keeps fucking my mouth with his fingers. “After all this time. Little flame. Look at you. Tight and soaked like your cunt forgot that I own her. I own every hole in your body. And when I come inside you? I’ll fuck babies in there. You’ll be swollen with them. Always.”

His gruff voice and barely contained pleasure have my stomach coiling. Another orgasm builds inside me. This one will be a strong one. Painful.

His.

Theirs.

Liam drops to all fours and Rome releases my mouth. One hand on my cheek, the other supporting his weight. He's being brutal, the way he's fucking me. Intense with how he's looking at me.

He isn't taking me missionary style. He's choking me with one hand now, finding new angles to ram into me, sinking deeper and harder and—Jesus, that's so good.

While he looks me in the eye and fucks me like he hates me, the other men touch me. They twist my nipples. Fist my hair at the top of my head and pull.

They're savages. Relentless.

They're making me come.

The darkness of the room turns into a bright light. White explodes behind my eyes. Tremors wrack my body and I'm gasping for air, gasping for *something*.

Which is already there. Liam kisses me first as he spills his seed inside of me with a growl.

"You did so well." He breaks the kiss to sit on his knees, to keep rocking into me as more of his cum fills me.

"Our woman." Damien's handsome, smiling face hovers over me. He bends to kiss me, with Liam still inside me, soft and sweet. Of course, he has to end it with a bite.

My bottom lip stings when it's Rome's turn.

"We're yours." His brow furrows, as though it's a struggle to say it, to know he's owned by another person. But then he kisses me, and he's so gentle and affectionate, I have no doubt he wants this. "We'll always be yours. Always."

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Quinlan

LIAM'S BARELY PULLED OUT of me before a warm throw blanket covers my shivering body. Hands and arms and lips are everywhere, as comforting and as swathing as the blanket itself.

"We have something to show you." I don't know how I ended up here, in Damien's lap on the sofa. My arms go around his neck. His voice is warm in my ear. "We didn't want to let you see Rex unraveling, but I don't think I'm doing you any favors by hiding it. He suffers. I need him to suffer. I owe it to Jagger and Laurel. Except…"

"Show me."

"I don't want you to." A few strands of hair have stuck to my cheeks, and Rome, who sits at our side, brushes it behind my back. "I promised I'll never let anything hurt you again, and fuck, watching it hurts *me* watching the videos from our investigators."

Liam, who apparently left, returns to the living room, his cellphone in hand, a wet cloth in the other.

I frown at the three of them.

"There're videos of him." Liam sits on my other side, lifting the blanket to clean me up.

He's so caring, so methodical. My head would fall on Damien's shoulder, that's how good it feels. On any other day. Today I'm on high alert. This information is too important for me to doze off.

“He shows his true face. Doesn’t hold back, the motherfucker. He talks about you…” The three of them growl, three beasts eager to murder him, right here, right now. “He mentions you there, being the bastard he is.”

“I should’ve enjoyed those.” Damien’s lips and teeth graze my neck and I shiver, pressing myself deeper into his embrace. “I did enjoy the parts where he curses life in general, when he’s being a miserable fuck. It doesn’t end there, though. I fucking hate that. I’m letting this shit go on because this revenge isn’t just for me. Otherwise…”

“You’d have killed him, yes. I’m glad you haven’t.” I am. They deserve Rex to suffer. Damien deserves it. “That’s why you’ve been keeping me here.”

“He’d hurt you the first shot he has.” Rome leans over Damien and me, taking the phone from Liam. “You know what? Fuck that. No. This was a mistake. Let’s settle this by agreeing that you’re never leaving home without us ever again. That you won’t lose it because we’re sticking to the plan.”

“Show. Me.” I’m staring into Rome’s eyes, reaching from beneath the blanket for the phone. “If watching him suffer is a part of your revenge plot, then it’s a part of mine just the same. We’re together in this.”

“She does have a point.” Damien doesn’t sound happy about it. At all. He kisses the crook of my neck softly. “His misery is a win for her too. We’re done hiding things from each other.”

“One video,” Liam offers a compromise, sliding closer to us, lending me his warmth. “That’s it.”

“You can always hit the stop button.” Damien tightens his grip, his arms a vise around my stomach. “There’s no shame in that. He’s a motherfucking bastard. No one should hear the shit coming out of his mouth. Especially you.”

Witnessing this monster doesn’t scare me. My heart needs to catch up with my head, and I know this will help. Has to.

Maybe I’ll be okay with it. So much so that I’ll fix us some popcorn and have a screening of these videos together. We could ask Jagger and Laurel to watch it with us on a video call once everything is behind us.

A smile teases my lips. How wholesome would that be?

Very.

My finger hovers over the play button, then I remember. “Do you have videos of Aria? I’d really like to watch those. Did she find another job?”

Liam’s head shakes, his eyes clouding.

“She didn’t find a new job?”

Another shake. Why is he being like this?

“You just don’t want to watch her suffer?”

“I don’t want to watch her, period.”

“Why?” I stroke the unruly curl on his forehead.

“You’re going to like this one, darling.” Damien smiles against my shoulder.

“There’s only one woman in my life, little flame.” He pulls my hand to his mouth, his lips pressing to my knuckles. Subtle tremors wrack through me. They feel a lot like love. They are love. “One woman who takes up all the free space in my heart. That’s you.”

“Our investigators follow her and Rex from morning to nighttime,” Rome elaborates, and while I look at him, my soul is being spread between the three of them equally. “When they go to bed, so do our men. We get a daily status report on Aria begging the bank to extend her loan and the like, but that’s that.”

I turn to Liam. Something stronger than love swells in my heart. The wax on my body. His eyes, the fidelity brimming in them.

“It won’t count as cheating, watching her suffer.” My commitment to him is stronger than my jealousy. Stronger than anything. He’s owed this. “It won’t. In fact, I insist—”

“No.” His hand on my mouth silences my objection. “She’s fucked. I’m aware. A few more days of that, and I’ll kill her. I don’t need to see her until then. I don’t *want* to see her until then. To know she suffers is enough.”

My fingers curl around his, prying his hand off. “You’re sure?”

“I am.”

“Okay.”

He raises an eyebrow, searching my face. “Okay.”

Damien presses a gentle hand to my cheek, returning my attention to the phone. And I hit play.

“You’re not firing me, Maeve.” Rex’s face is beet red.

The bright hue is visible, thanks to the camera the private investigator used. He recorded him through a window looking over into Rex’s apartment.

He’s standing there, looking over the street. His white shirt is wrinkled, his hair greasy.

His small apartment is a mess. A few containers layer his old rug. Envelopes are scattered on his tiny eating table. I assume it's bills and my parents' files. The doctors must have given them to him to study while I was gone.

That's partially my fault. The moment I moved in with Liam, Damien and Rome—the moment I was *kidnapped*—I changed the recipient's name on my parents' bills. I pay them online, but they had to go somewhere. I wasn't having them pile up at my door or on Mom and Dad's. My parents don't need the extra stress.

Despite everything I've learned about myself here, I don't hate them. My parents never intended for Blake to die. They were negligent and that cost him his life. Then they've pretty much left me to fend for myself after my brother is gone.

I'm done sacrificing my life for them, but I'm not abandoning them. I don't have it in me to add to their pain.

"I said I was sorry for throwing the coffee at the client. Ice coffee. She didn't get a burn or something. Fucking cry-baby is what she is." Maeve talks and Rex paces. Tugs at his hair. "A lawsuit? I gave her a refund. She can't sue us."

My laugh is a sad one. A tear slips out of the corner of my eye.

Rome hits the pause button, pressing a kiss to my temple. "Our investigators never got that close to the both of you when you were together. Was that how he'd talk to you?"

"Some days," I whisper. "I thought it was grief."

Damien's arms aren't a vise around me anymore. He's suffocating me. I let him, stroking his forearms. Trailing my nails over his veins. Along his smooth, taut skin.

"I thought it was because I was responsible for Blake's death. And that he didn't want me to die because… Because he loved me for me." When I suck in a shuddering breath, Liam's there to rub his knuckles over my cheek. I twist my head to kiss them, and it's so nice. Feeling him beneath my lips. "He doesn't miss Blake. Not anymore, at least. He stopped loving me years ago. He fooled me."

"He fooled everyone." Damien grabs my hand.

I can only imagine.

"I'm fine." I am. Fuck him.

I press Play.

“Me? A liability?” Rex grabs the plant I bought him for his last birthday, bashing it against the wall. The ceramic pot shatters into a million pieces. The Peace Lily and the soil scatter on the floor. “I’ve worked for you for years. Years. Yes, I’m aware a lawsuit is messy business. It’ll ruin your reputation. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It’ll blow over. No? Of course it will.”

“Go, Maeve,” I cheer on the woman on the other line, my tears drying.

“This is all…” he growls, slamming his fist on the wall next to his window. He stares blankly at the investigator without ever seeing him. “Listen to me, Maeve. This is all my sister’s fault.”

“What? Me?” My hands ball into fists. Damien runs his thumb over them. The two other men touch and caress and kiss me. “My fucking fault?”

“No, she didn’t throw the coffee at the client. You saw the video.” A groan comes while he listens to Maeve. “She’s supposed to take care of my dad and her mom. That’s her job, see, and she’s off somewhere. Doing… Well, I hate saying that about my own flesh and blood, but this has to be said.”

“This is the part where it stopped being funny.” Damien angles my face to his, offering me an out.

Unnecessary. I look back on the phone.

“She’s a slut, okay? I—yes, a slut. She’s not selling herself, no. That I could understand. The bitch spreads her legs for free.”

Rex is honest. His version of it, anyway. The edge to his voice. The disgust in his eyes. My suspicions were spot on. He put two and two together from my emails to my parents.

I was taken against my own free will, but I’m fine now. I’m where I should be.

“She ran off with this man. Maybe more than one, who the fuck knows. Left me to handle our parents by myself. To have orgies.” He pauses. “What does this have to do with you? Maybe show some leniency until I figure this out? I will. Just let me keep my job, since her whore money is going directly to help her parents. I’ll be out on the street, Maeve, if you fire me. I don’t have any savings. Give me another chance. I’ll prove it to you.”

I’ve had enough of this. My head pounds and I’m sick to my stomach.

This has been a long evening. The last eighteen years have been long and tiring, and I only want to curl into a ball in Damien’s arms and for the video to stop rolling.

I get both.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Quinlan

“MS. PALMER?” THAT’S KANNON, our new doorman. Poor Ashton. “Are you home?”

Of course I’m home. He knows this. It’s Liam, Rome and Damien who won’t be here for another hour or so. The sun began to set a few minutes ago. There’s time.

They work hard, spending hours in the office. I admire them for it.

Me, on the other hand, I’ve been letting myself enjoy this work-free life over the last week. Since the men showed me Rex’s true colors, I’ve been doing my damnedest to be happy.

I wanted it. My men ordered me to do it.

So, here I am, being happy. Genuinely happy.

BLF Capital’s website has been perfected and approved. The rest of my clients are pretty chill for the time being.

Now, I can try new things. I’ve found joy in reading, in cooking, and yoga to stretch after the grueling boxing sessions with Rome.

Other than that, I’ve been hunting for other psychiatrists and mental health treatment plans and facilities for my parents. I haven’t decided which ones will do, but I’m getting there.

I throw myself even harder into it when my men’s stories hurt me the most. When my consciousness whispers that I’m being lazy. That I’m holding back from doing the thing I love, which is working. Being creative.

Except seeking and reaching out to new clients will draw attention to myself. We can't have that. Just a few more days, and I'll have my routine back.

We'll have our revenge.

We're so close. Almost there.

A smile teases my lips as I rise from my place on the sofa. I stretch my arms over my head, watching the horizon. Imagine my men like I always do, if only for a fleeting moment.

Liam's amber eyes and the special kind of fire he saves especially for me.

Damien's sharp teeth that marked my breasts *again* this morning.

Rome and the scrapes on his knuckles. How coarse they felt on my cheek when he woke me up today.

Our connection. The bond we have runs through our blood. Always present, forever strong. They soothe the constant anger that swells within me just by being there. The reminder of them is enough.

I wish my parents would answer, though. That's the only thing I'm missing. At least they're doing well. They're being watched by one of the investigators, and I'll see them soon. We'll have our talk once things settle, once they'll be under constant monitoring.

They aren't perfect and we'll have our emotional wound to pry open, metaphorical puss to clean. It'll take time. It'll take months or maybe years. Eventually we'll get through it.

Or we won't.

Whatever happens, it'll be alright.

If the people I love and I have survived for this long, I can survive anything.

I head toward the front door to greet Kannon and Shawna, my sneakers padding soundlessly on the wooden floor. "Over here."

At the sound of my voice, Kannon steps into our home. Shawna makes a beeline for the kitchen, unsupervised.

I'm the one who's being supervised now.

An overkill, I know. But it's cute. I actually think it's sweet, that my men do everything in their power to keep me safe.

I allow it.

"How are you, Kannon?"

"Good, thank you, Ms. Palmer." Kannon, who has to be six-five, towers over me. They hired him on purpose, so I could never run away. "How are

you today?”

“Great.”

“I almost forgot. A courier left this for you.” He holds out a slim, white envelope for me. “Caught me when I was on my way to the elevator.”

Butterflies burst in my stomach. No one other than three delicious men knows where I live. This has to be them.

I flip my palm face up, gesturing for him to hand it over. When he doesn’t, I add an impatient, “Um. Thanks.”

His green eyes narrow. Auburn eyebrows—the color of his short hair—lower on his forehead. He isn’t gawking. Isn’t looking down my oversized T-shirt or studying my curves in my favorite pair of jeans.

Something about the letter bothers him.

“Kannon, I believe this one’s for me?” I tilt my head, my hair falling to the side.

“Listen, I waited until I got here.” His face hardens. “To have your permission to open it. Inspect it for any threats.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks. I’ve lost most of my inhibitions over the time I’ve lived here. Letting a stranger read through a sexy letter from my boyfriends, though? No way. I’d die. I would never be able to look Kannon in the eye after this.

“That won’t be necessary.” I motion to him with my fingers again. “*They* sent it to me. Can’t be anyone else.”

“Are you sure, Ms. Palmer?” The creases on his forehead deepen. “I would feel better if I cleared this before handing it over to you.”

“I’m su—”

Glass crashes, the loud noise coming from the kitchen.

“Motherfucker,” Shawna yells. “Sorry, Quinlan.”

Normally, I’d run over to help.

Normally, I wouldn’t have sexy words written on a paper waiting for me. A letter. It’s so old school. So incredibly hot.

“Shawna needs you.” My fingers clasp on the other end of the envelope.

“She can handle herself.” Kannon doesn’t budge. Releasing the letter and leaving me by myself isn’t something he’s willing to do.

“I swear.” I put a hand to my heart. “I won’t leave. This letter is safe.”

Not safe for work, but again, this isn’t information I’m willing to share with Kannon.

“And personal.”

“Shawna, you’re such an idiot,” she grumbles to herself. Low thuds and glass crackles follow. She probably swipes it into the dustpan, whatever it is. “The jam jars? Seriously.”

Oh, no. Poor lady.

“It would take forever to clean up this mess. Ugh. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“Rome will need his order replaced. Before he gets home, which is within the next hour.”

The mention of his name, plus my serious tone, does the trick.

“Please, don’t go anywhere.” He releases the envelope to my hold, closing the door when another string of curses leaves Shawna’s mouth.

When she starts crying, Kannon sprints over there. He trusts the door will close the rest of the way.

He shouldn’t have. On an instinct, I grab the door.

There’s no real reason for me to do that. I’m not planning on leaving the apartment to go to them. They’ll come to me, and on me, soon enough. After work.

This letter is nothing but a sexy foreplay.

Still, my hand remains firm on the door.

My phone buzzes on the table in the living room where I left it. Now I *know* they were the ones who sent me that letter. They’re probably calling to check if I got it.

Unable to wait a second longer, I open the envelope, my heart racing as I do.

As soon as I see the letter inside, my breath gets knocked out of me. Damien, Liam and Rome take great care with their things. Their home. Their jobs. Their revenge. Me.

They would’ve *never* sent me a letter written on crumpled paper.

Okay. Don’t panic. It’s just a letter. Even if it’s not them, it won’t bite.

At least that’s what I try to convince myself as I unfold the piece of paper tucked inside the envelope.

My hands shake. Then my hammering takes a nosedive, headfirst to the floor.

Quinlan.

Our dad and your mom aren’t doing well. It’s the worst they’ve ever been.

I called them last night (couldn’t get off work). They threatened to kill themselves. Said they weren’t fucking around. I would’ve emailed you, figured your new BOYFRIEND monitors your messages.

Never mind that. My point being, I can't do this alone anymore. They won't survive without you.

You've had your fun. You needed the time off.

Fine. I get it. But they're your parents.

They said they needed you. That your email destroyed them.

If they die, it'll be on your conscience, as it should. Hell, they might already be dead by the time you get this.

Be a decent human being and try anyway.

Not for me. For them.

Rex.

"Here, Shawna, I'll do it. Sit, please," Kannon says from the kitchen.

She sniffs. "Thank you."

Their conversation is background noise, dulled by the impending sense of doom that's everywhere. Guilt swoops in, consuming me. Swallowing me whole. Our investigators said Mom and Dad have been taking their medication as prescribed. They haven't bought any sharp objects. Haven't contacted the funeral home like they do sometimes.

However, it is possible they haven't done any of it and still consider… Still want…

A sob rips through me. I bite down on the inside of my cheek. Hard.

I can't think. Or I can, because I decide against doubling back and calling Damien, Rome or Liam. Any one of them.

They'd take too long to get here. Mom and Dad wouldn't let the investigators in if they told them to knock. They could break into the house, but it could trigger my parents. They could scare them into getting on with it faster.

What if my dad stumbles off the stool and accidentally hangs himself? Mom could startle with a knife pinned to her throat, and then…

And then…

What have I done?

Oh, God. What have I *done*?

While I've been out here, fucking and living and being so goddamn happy, my parents have been withering.

Yes, I'm not going to be there every second of every day for them. Yes, I'll hire professional help to stay with them around the clock.

In the future.

Right now, all by themselves out there, they might as well have no one.

It’s my fault. I’ve spent hours searching for the perfect facility, the perfect professionals. I should’ve just settled on something good enough. But I’ve found so many.

They can’t die. I can’t bury them so soon.

I won’t.

The world is a blur. I’m mildly aware of dropping the letter to the floor. My feet are moving, small steps that feel like I’m running. A button appears out of nowhere. I mash it, and it takes no time for the elevator doors to slide open.

Right, I’m getting out of here. That’s why I hurl myself into the cart. I refuse to cry, blinking back tears on my ride down. I need to be focused. I have to—

“Ms. Palmer.” The other doorman at the front desk sounds polite but firm. I’m sure I look haunted enough that he knows I am she and not some other tenant.

I don’t pretend to be someone else, either. Don’t linger to explain to him that every second I spend here could be the second my parents take their lives.

“Stop, please, Ms. Palmer!”

What I do is break into the fastest run of my life as I cross the lobby.

Tears sting at the corners of my eyes, and I blink them away. They dry without my help. I’m outside now, the cold gust of wind whipping at my face.

“Wait, please.” The shout at my back does nothing to slow me.

A taxi pulls up to the curb at the corner of the street. An available taxi, according to the green sign.

Hope.

Money to pay for the ride. I don’t have it. I’ll take care of it.

Once I get there.

I’m almost there. No one on the street eyes the taxi until this one man does. He’s in a suit, striding toward my ride. My. Ride.

His gait is long, confident. He outstretches an arm to stop me from getting there first, I think.

No. Fuck that. I’m not waiting.

Hell, they might already be dead by the time you get this.

Back there in the building, I thought I ran fast. The fastest I’ve ever run.

Wrong.

This is it. My lungs have a hard time catching up with my feet, and you know what? Fuck my lungs. I'll rest when the car starts driving.

If they die, it'll be on your conscience, as it should.

Rex wouldn't lie to me about that. I refuse to believe he'd be that cruel.

"Hey!" the Suit—my competition—yells when I wrench the door open before he gets there. "Stop."

Without so much as a *hello*, I fold myself into the backseat, slamming the door behind me.

The second doorman from my building flings his body forward. He's out in the street, talking on his walkie talkie and waving his free arm, telling me to, "Come back, Ms. Palmer."

"Drive." I rattle my parents' address to the lady driver. A black baseball cap hides her face, her blonde hair draping down her back. "Hurry, please."

"I just need to set the sign to *occupied*." She's painstakingly slow as she slides her finger on the dashboard. As if this is the first time she's done that. Everyone's coming at us.

"Please, just go."

"Hold on." Her voice is strained. "One more second and…"

Air rushes in as a door opens. Someone starts sliding into the backseat behind the driver. A dark figure in jeans and a tan shirt bends.

One of his legs is already in the taxi.

Since my driver continues stalling, I'll have to be the one to tell him to get the fuck off.

Fine with me.

"Sir, you can't come in here. This is my—"

He's fully seated now, turning to face me.

"Hey, kid. Going somewhere?"

Oh, shit.

Rex.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Quinlan

THE TAXI BLENDS INTO traffic, and she's fast. As fast as the cars around her would allow. Is she even going to take me to my parents?

I don't answer Rex, twisting to the door, pulling the handle. Nothing happens.

It's locked from the inside.

No, I don't think she's taking me to my parents. Rex must have paid her or something.

Fuck.

Even though it's hopeless, I keep testing the handle. It's an old car. It could give in.

It could.

"What's this, Quinlan?" Rex says behind me, his tone derisive. "We haven't seen each other in a month, and you already try to leave me again?"

Fuck this handle. I turn to face him, frowning at this *thing*. At this monster.

"Got something to say?" He cocks an eyebrow.

A month ago, I would've frozen in place at the underlying threat. A month ago, his evil grin would've scared me into being the docile, perfect sister he wanted me to be.

Thing is, I've changed.

My need to please and pacify people who don't deserve my kindness died in the penthouse that I now call home.

New boundaries have been set in place, and they're erected high. So high, they reach the clouds. I'm stronger than I've ever been, physically and emotionally.

My eyes are wide fucking open.

"Where are you taking me?" I growl at both him and the driver.

And—that's odd. There's no partition between us. A sign I missed while I was frantic to make it to my parents.

Rex's laugh pulls me from my thoughts, the sound sickening. My stomach roils, my hands clenching into fists. Whatever his answer is, it doesn't matter.

Liam, Rome, and Damien are my stalkers. They'll get to me. They always will.

"You have some nerve, demanding answers." Rex sneers, wiping the smile off his face. "As if you're owed something."

His expression isn't something new. He curled his lips at me that way before. I convinced myself he's upset because of work. That he was tormented about our devastating past.

Disdain. That's what it really is. He can't stand the sight of me. Hasn't since the day we lost Blake at the pool.

Since the day we became a burden.

"I'm owed a lot." A fresh wave of fury pushes me to yell at him. I've been wanting to do this for so long. He hurt Damien. He *cut* him. My man. Mine. "*You* owe a lot of people a lot of things, you bastard."

"Yeah, right." The woman in the front sniggers, then laugh-snorts. Her eyes in the rare view mirror are almost black.

"Excuse me?"

She shoots me a scornful gaze before returning her attention to the road.

I'm too focused on her that I miss Rex's movement.

"Worthless sluts aren't owed shit, little sister." His hand is on my chin, hurting me as he forces my face to his mad one.

Stupid. Rome would've been disappointed.

Always protect your face. That's a good girl, sweetheart.

Rome would've wanted me to stay focused and figure out how to get myself out of this.

I glare at Rex, my hands on his wrist.

“Foster fucking kids, miserable sacks of shit that no one cares about.” His grip on me tightens. He doesn’t flinch when I claw at his skin. Nothing gives. “Their junky parents included? They’re owed even less.”

“What did they ever do to you?”

“They were my meal ticket.” He shakes my face, and I snarl. “A talking, walking, motherfucking raucous meal ticket. Couldn’t stand them.”

We weave through the heavy traffic, inching forward. Getting farther away from my new home. Rex’s fingers hurt me the tighter he squeezes my chin.

He’s furious at me. For enjoying my time in captivity. For leaving him in charge. That I chose the enemy over him.

His enemy.

The naïve girl with the blinds over her eyes—that girl from a month ago—she’d have clung onto hope. Regardless of the anger oozing from Rex’s, she’d make excuses for him.

She’d do everything to appease him, to calm the tantrum that brims behind his eyes.

That girl would’ve still believed Rex’s letter. She’d know that this taxi will take her to her parents.

Except it won’t. My parents haven’t threatened to kill themselves, have they?

I feel sorry for the girl I used to be for all of a second.

Getting out of here alive is my priority. I’m being kidnapped for real this time.

Damien knew this was coming. My sweet, psychotic, and smart man.

Rex will hurt me to get to him.

His brown eyes look at me like he hates me. Sadistic psychopath. “You chose the wrong team, Quinlan. You fool. They’re worthless.”

“Their friends are fucking worthless too,” the driver pitches in, her voice venomous.

Why? If she’s being paid to kidnap me, why would she care?

Because she isn’t being paid to be here.

My eyes squint, and I glare at her from where Rex holds me in place. I have no idea who she is. I’ve never seen her in Maeve’s. She could be a cop, although that doesn’t make sense, either. To risk it all for Rex? I don’t think so.

She hates them. She said *his friends*. It means Rome, and…

Motherfucker.

“Aria?” I growl, trying hard not to lose it.

I can’t afford to lose it. I have to keep my head. Have to think. And I do.

A plan forms in my head. Clear steps that’d get me out of this mess, if I put myself into it.

I will. Oh, I will. They’ll never see it coming.

“That was fast. The whiney asshole tattled about me?” Her eyes cut to the rearview mirror. “Yes, I can tell he did. Such a fucking baby. Over twenty years later, and he’s the same loser he’s been when I babysat him.”

Rex chuckles. My nostrils flare, my nails digging into his wrist.

My first instinct is to scream at her. Tell her that these men are *mine*. That no one talks about what’s mine. Much less the people who hurt them.

But then they’ll go on the defense. They’ll be on high alert, making it that much harder for me to trick them.

Breathe. Breathe, Quinlan.

Fine. Deep inhale through gritted my teeth, and I’m back in the game. I stay still, leading Rex to believe that I’m his captive. That I can’t run away.

“How did you meet her?” I ask him.

“I told you, kid, I owe you shit.”

“His cop buddies,” Aria volunteers the information. She presses the brakes at a red light, slinging her arm over the back of the seat to turn to me. To gloat at me. The dumb bitch. “They made it so easy for him too.”

“Aria, shut up,” Rex barks.

“You’re not in charge here,” she hisses. “I’ve been waiting for this, and you’ll let me have it. You’ll let me rub it in Liam’s little bitch’s face. You’re very protective of the prick, aren’t you? That means he loves you too and so, no, Rex, I won’t shut up. I’ll say whatever the hell I want. I—”

“Shut the hell up,” he barks. “Stop feeding her information.”

“No, you shut up.” A short, black metal rod appears in her hand. She snatched it from the passenger seat, the dumb bitch. I’m over here, unbound, and she basically gives me a weapon to use on her. “Anyway, your brother worked his connections a couple of weeks ago. He’d been searching for Damien’s weak spots. First, it was his foster siblings, but Jagger, the other one, what’s her face?”

“Laurel,” I hiss her name before Rex can. They don’t have the right to repeat it.

“Yeah, that one. They aren’t here. Jagger’s apartment is empty. The chick lives in Europe.” Aria twists her face to us, giving me a better view of her smirk. Of her ugly face. “So your half-brother here did some digging. He found out where Damien lives and about his roommates. After that, finding the accident report was child’s play. Then Rex found me, and I have to say, it was creepy that he came up to me at night, but it made sense. He said it was when he didn’t feel like we’re being watched, and I think he was right.”

Damn him. He might’ve not seen the private investigators, haven’t found out where they were hiding. He has, however, sniffed them out.

“Are you done?” Rex scowls at the black rod. “Or are you planning to tell her everything?”

“I’ll say whatever I goddamn please.” She cackles, pressing the gas when the light turns green. “Look at her, she’s so angry. She deserves it. This is my revenge too.”

Fine with me. The more she talks, the better. They could have more accomplices waiting for them out there. It’s vital that I know everything. I won’t be blindsided when I pull off my plan.

Rex curses at her, his free hand locking on my bicep. My left one.

I have to bite down on my smirk.

I’m right-handed, bitch.

“Rome’s parents have *fled the country*. Right. I bet they’re dead.” Her words are like knives to the chest. These two people know. They have a good idea, at the very least. “I’m still alive. Still unemployed. Tell me, cunt, is Liam responsible for me getting fired? He must be. Just like he’s probably responsible for moving his parents away from here. Weak. He was always weak.”

Her words don’t hurt. Her words are nothing but a flow of information while I scan my surroundings. After a quick sweep of the street, I learn that we’re driving downtown. The night descends on the city and the alleys keep getting darker and darker.

“So, no one else, huh?” My eyes cut to Rex.

“Three men, Quinlan. Did you let them fuck you?” Rex snorts. “You know what? Don’t want to hear it. You disgust me.”

“Didn’t plan on it.” Unlike Aria, I can and will keep my cards close to my chest.

I’ll be smart about this. I’ll strike at the exact. Right. Moment.

My lips are pressed into a thin line, my eyes giving nothing.

A bump in the road and…

This is my cue. My only shot at getting back at them and breaking free.

The car rattles at the bump. A slight movement I'm quick to use to my advantage. My chin slips out of Rex's grip and—*yes*—my jab hits him square in the jaw.

"The fuck?" His eyes are wide. He's frozen in place. In shock.

Aria shouts, "What's going on back there?"

I land another blow to Rex's cheek.

There isn't enough space for me to draw my arm back like I'm supposed to. Doesn't matter. Rome taught me what to do in case I'm cornered. I twist my body as much as I can, using the momentum to throw another punch at Rex. This one lands on his eye.

"Bitch!" he shouts, scrambling to put his hands both on his face and on me.

To hurt me.

He'll fail.

Aria does exactly what I intended her to. She's driving slower, her eyes scouring the alleys. Searching for an empty one. A place to stop, where she can hit me with her metal rod.

Not if I get to her first.

The days anyone—anyone at all—hurts my men are over.

My plan is only as good as long as we're moving. I need the momentum for it to succeed.

Rex grunts and reaches for me. He's about to put his hands on me again, and this time he won't let go. Not until I'm dead.

I'm way ahead of him. One hand on the headrest of the passenger seat, and the other on the back of the seat behind me. I push myself up, my feet lifting from the floor of the car.

Boom and my left foot hits Rex's groin, staying punned there.

"I'll kill you." His hands are on my ankle as he swears and swears.

No, you won't. Not when you're banged up and hopefully concussed.

Any moment now, I'll fuck up these bastards and escape. My men will find me.

Together, we'll finish this.

I'm not sure how I know that. Where this absolute certainty is coming from.

I just do.

“Hold on, Rex,” Aria yells. She speeds up at the sound of a police siren, swerving to the left. “I’m pulling over.”

Into an alley.

Thankfully, she takes the turn fast. Too fast. I must be the luckiest person alive.

Adrenaline shoots through my blood. I taste war on my tongue. Victory.

My foot stays on Rex’s crotch as I lean forward. As he shouts obscenities at me, I reach the metal rod. It’s so far, but I—I have it. *Yes*.

Aria is focused on the alley ahead of her and I—

Boom.

The metal connects to her head. Aria gasps, screams, calls me a cunt.

I’m the cunt that’ll ruin you.

Rex screams louder when I put all my weight forward, between the two front seats. I let go of the rod, and it clinks onto the car’s floor.

Aria doesn’t disappoint, doing more of what I wanted her to.

It’s Blake helping me. I’m sure it’s him. My baby brother.

Thank you.

Her foot remains on the gas when I grab the wheel with one hand and steer us to a brick wall. Slam one hand to the roof of the car for balance.

Brace for impact.

Three.

Two.

One.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Liam

MY CHEST FEELS LIKE it’s been hollowed out. The space between my ribs has been emptied.

It’s a pit so deep that I can’t tell where it ends. So dark that I’m sure that if anyone will open me up right now, all they’ll see is black.

That worries me. What lurks at the bottom.

A closet door being slammed in my face. An uncontrolled fire.

Why? No fucking idea. I’m just…blank.

My Zippo rests on my office desk. Gold and heavy.

I should reach for it. A flick of my thumb, the familiar flame. I’ll be fine then.

Nothing’s wrong. Nothing’s out of place.

Quinlan’s resting, which is the best thing I could’ve hoped for. After years of being treated like a cash cow, slash the help. Finally, she’s been taking some much-needed time for herself. We get to spoil her.

While I miss stalking her from the camera on her laptop, she never misses a single call. Answers every text.

There’s no reason to worry. I called her about an hour ago just to hear her voice. She was fine. She was waiting for us to be back home.

Our precious woman is fine.

I leave my Zippo untouched, spinning my chair to look at the outside world. At the view from my office. She could be doing the same thing.

Staring outside, imagining us here.

Only…I can do more than imagine her.

The cameras I had installed in our home while she was sleeping last week would give me a direct view of her, if she's in the living room. We won't be discussing our revenge plans anymore, so we're not worried about anyone hacking them.

I haven't used it before. Haven't felt this empty before, either.

Quinlan will forgive me for the invasion of her privacy. She'll call me a stalker, maybe even yell at me. I'll fuck accusations out of her.

End of story.

A few clicks, and I'll see her. Except…Fuck. I can't lie to her.

My eyes slam shut. I visualize her instead. Smell her sweet scent. Feel her skin bending. Watch my friends around us, taking turns in kissing her. In living our perfectly normal lives. Our almost happily ever after.

Visualizing it should've filled the black hole in my heart.

Nothing. Maybe calling her would fix this.

"Liam." Damien's here, his voice urgent.

This has to be something to do with work. Has to be.

Of course it doesn't.

The bottomless pit in my chest. This endless tumble.

Quinlan.

I'm up on my feet, shoving my chair back. It cracks against the edge of the desk at the force. I spin to find both my friends in my office, their expressions harsh and horrified and what the fuck.

"Where. Is. She." I don't recognize my own voice.

"We have to move." Rome's knuckles shine brighter than I've ever seen them, his fists clenched tight. "Rex *and* Aria managed to lose our investigators less than an hour ago."

Can't move. Can't do anything.

The Zippo.

Fuck the Zippo. I swipe it off my desk. Bash the damn thing on the furthest wall. "Don't care. Where. Is. She?"

"They reappeared. Outside our building."

Mistake. *Mistake*. *Mistake*.

The word pushes itself over and over again against my ribs. Quinlan has no idea what Aria looks like.

Mistake.

When we took Quinlan to ourselves, I tore Aria's photo out of our notebook. Quinlan didn't need to see this shit if she ever got her hands on it.

A beautiful, pure thing like her shouldn't be tainted by filth.

Our hands and teeth mark her flesh. Her cunt stretches for us. Her womb is soaked with our cum.

She bears our scars on her stomach. We have hers on our fingers.

She has the signs of our love all over her.

There was no way I'd have let her see Aria. Nothing should've stained Quinlan.

Something *is* doing that.

Aria could be torturing her. Rex could.

And we're useless fucks standing *here*. Because of me. Because I'm paralyzed with terror and rage.

My thumb goes to the ring finger on my right hand.

We swore no one would hurt her, and I broke that vow as soon as the words left my mouth. Had she had seen Aria's face, Damien and Rome wouldn't have been standing here.

There wouldn't be this suffocating, sheer terror.

Fuck. This.

"Out." The damned word I'm too familiar with.

Let me out, *Aria, this isn't funny. It's been hours. Let me go. Let me go. Please, let me* out. *Let me* out *of here.*

I won't be begging her this time. I'll fucking gut her. I'll sink my hand into her stomach and pull out her organs one by one. Whatever she did to Quinlan, she'll pay for it. Tenfold.

A millionfold.

Damien fills me in on the way to his SUV.

"We have people on them," Damien summarizes when he tells me the whole story.

The investigators found Rex and Aria too late. Failed their job. They couldn't even catch her when they ran over the fake taxi to stop Quinlan from getting in.

"She'll be fine," he grits as he's driving as fast as he can, cutting off cars while tracking the signal from the investigator's car.

Nothing slows him down. Not the light turning red. Not the people crossing the road. He blows the horn of his SUV, explaining in so many words that he'll run over them if he must.

Rome and I don’t say a word. If other people must die so Quinlan can live, then so be it.

Our investigators, as trained in combat as they are, wouldn’t be able to save her. No one would. We’re the only ones who’d take a bullet, a knife for her, anything for her. A fire could consume me, and I’ll die wearing a smile on my face.

As long as she lives.

Damien takes sharp turns in the dwindling traffic, going over the speed limit.

I’m in the seat next to him, too wired to fill in the silence. My nerves are shot. My scars burn, but for the first time, the one on my cheek doesn’t sting the most.

It’s the one on my ring finger. A fitting punishment for failing to prepare Quinlan for this. For failing to transport myself to wherever she is and save her.

We’ll get to her. We’ll get to her, and she’ll be safe and unscathed. Nothing’s happened. Nothing. Has. Happened.

We’ll have her in our arms in no time.

We’ll slaughter Aria and Rex a second after. By the morning, there’ll be nothing left of them. Not even ashes. That’s a motherfucking promise.

Damien takes a shortcut as we’re getting closer to the beeping red dot on his screen.

I want to reach inside the console and grab it. Pull the car that has Quinlan in here, and I. Can’t.

My head pounds.

Rome’s phone rings. Could be either Ace or Gavin, the investigators who are two steps ahead of us. I tune into his conversation without averting my gaze from the screen. That goddamn dot is slowing. What are they doing?

“Talk.”

Waiting for Rome has Damien’s knuckles whitening around the wheel. He’s growling, the sound blending with the feral sound coming out of me.

“The car *what*?”

Stopped.

That’s what the dot on the screen does.

They’ve stopped. But she’s okay. Has to be.

“No…” Rome again.

Adrenaline surges into my blood, and I rip the metaphorical door open. I won't be locked in a closet for this. My panic won't stop me from saving her.

Nothing will.

"No," he repeats, throwing a punch at the SUV's door. "They didn't crash. You are not telling me their car crashed. Where's Quinlan? Is she with you?"

"Fuck this," Damien hisses, pressing the gas paddle for all he's worth.

A woman runs out of the road when he does. I barely acknowledge her existence.

They might've crashed the car to kill her. They might've killed Quinlan and then—

"She's *what*?"

"Stop," I shout before Damien has a chance to turn into the alley where our private investigators are. "Stop the car."

We're still moving when I wrench the door open and throw myself out onto the road. Stumble. Stagger.

Break into a run.

Gavin and Ace hover near what must be Aria's taxi. The car crashed ten feet into the alley, the front is mashed into the wall.

How did it get there?

Don't care. Don't care. I do. Not. Care.

"Leave." With a finger pointed toward the road, I start pulling the door handle. I run faster. I don't need them there. Don't want them there.

No one's going to see Quinlan first. No one's going to deliver us the bad news. No one's going to save her but us.

Faintly, I hear footsteps behind me in the dark street.

Could've been elephants stomping the street for all I care.

I see *her*.

I'm at the rear door and my goddamn heart is in my throat. A dull thud comes from there. A shoe beats against the window.

Her shoe.

I'd recognize her sneakers anywhere. I memorized every item in her closet. Every detail about her has been ingrained in my mind.

Into my heart.

Again, again, again. She's alive. She's fighting.

With *them* inside there next to her.

They might be conscious. They might be touching her. Hurting her. Trying to kill her while she's trapped inside.

"We're here," I say. I whisper. I shout. Who knows.

What matters is that I grab the door handle.

"Quinlan." Damien's at my side, punching the window with his bare fist while I yank on the handle over and over and over.

Rome's at the front side, landing his own set of furious blows to the passenger window after the handle gets him nowhere. The glass cracks faster for him.

Good. Good. Thank God for Rome. It's as though he's been anticipating this. Like he's practiced his entire life anticipating this moment.

He won't hurt himself in his attempts to get to Quinlan. He won't, because he was made for this. He'll do it before Damien will break a bone trying. She'll be fine.

"Quinlan," he shouts. The glass fractures first. I hear it crack, then bash in. Rome pushes his head in, reaches his arm inside. "Sweetheart. There you are. Come here. Can you take my hand?"

I throw the side of my body on the door. The damned thing is scrunched. With enough force, it could relent. I could help her if she can't get to Rome.

"Rome," Quinlan screams. Laughs. She fucking *laughs*. "I did it. I knocked them out. They're out cold. Ha!"

The logical thing would've been to let Rome come over and break this window for us.

We're past logic. Past common sense. The three of us.

And she's *laughing*.

"Good girl. My good girl. I'm coming for you." The upper half of Rome's body disappears into the car, his suit jacket tearing on the broken window.

"I have you." His fingers wrap around her shin; I see it from my place in the street. "I have you, sweetheart. Come on, we're getting you out of here."

He wouldn't be able to pull her out like that. Any other day, he'd be aware of that. Not today. Not with panic and adrenaline taking over him. Over the three of us.

"I'm trying."

"Are you getting the door?" Maybe he does see reason. Some. His hand doesn't leave Quinlan, though.

“Yes.” The damn window cracks for Damien.

“The door’s locked from the inside.” She keeps kicking with her other foot near the spot Damien has splintered.

I don’t tell her it’s jammed from the outside. I don’t because—*thank fuck*—it relents. It opens for me.

“Damien, out of the way.” A second is all I have in me to offer him. Offer them.

He moves. Rome can’t. Won’t, I think. He can’t take the blow.

I yank on the handle hard anyway, and the door hits Rome when I hurl it as far as it’d go.

He doesn’t waver, his hand squeezing Quinlan’s shin harder.

“Darling.” The name out of Damien’s mouth is relief. The strangled type, barely pushed out of his throat.

I get it. I feel the same. Breathing is a challenge when I see her on top of that bastard, Rex. She was right. His eyes are closed, head slumped to the side. His cheek is on his shoulder and his arms aren’t folded around Quinlan.

But he’s there with her. And Aria’s passed out in the front seat.

They wouldn’t stay that way forever.

Damien moves first. He bats Rome’s hand away from her. A gentle slap, and Rome’s out of the way, pulling himself out of the car.

A heartbeat later, Damien’s inside instead. Hands gripping Quinlan’s hips, his strong muscles yanking her out of there.

“Damien,” she screams, and this, too, sounds a lot like relief. Her gray eyes are frantic, and I know they’re searching for mine. She finds me and her grin has never been wider. “Liam. You’ve found me. I knew you would.”

“Always,” I breathe out the word.

It sends a spiral of warmth through me to watch her alive. In his arms. Damien pins her cheek to his chest, cups the back of her head and presses his lips to the top of her head. Inhales her scent like he needs it to survive. Has to touch her everywhere and make sure she’s okay. That she’s really here.

We all do, but we give him space. And that’s fine. He’s an extension of us and she’s okay, he’s making sure of that.

“Darling. We’ll always find you. Always.” When he draws back, he kisses her so thoroughly, she moans into his mouth. “I’d lose my fucking

heart, my goddamn *life*, before I lose you. Fuck, I love you. Fuck, you're safe. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Thank God for you."

"Little flame." Damien squeezes her one more time, and I have her.

One arm around her back, a hand on her cheek. She's exquisite, but this isn't why I can't look away. Why my eyes roam over her features. The slope of her neck. The outline of her collarbone.

I'm searching for bruises in case Damien was too lost to see them.

"Motherfucker." There's one. Her cheek swells. A touch of purple paints her heart tattoo. Ruins it.

Ruins me.

"He didn't do this." Quinlan strokes the scar on my cheek, burrowing her body into mine. Comforting me. I can't stop grinding my teeth. "No one did."

"The impact."

"Yes."

I can't stop looking at her. Can't stop myself from brushing my lips to the wound. Kissing it. Licking it. I don't have an ice pack to make it better for her. Don't have anything but my heart in my throat and my lips and tongue.

I'm useless. But then she whimpers, and I'm her hero all over again. I'm hard, groaning as I suck and kiss her cheek.

"I love you." I trail kisses down to her mouth, tilting her face up. Nuzzling her nose.

"I love you too." Her gray eyes sparkle, pupils wide. "They tricked me. Rex sent me a letter saying my parents were going to kill themselves. When I figured it out…" A bright smile. An unhinged one. "I showed them. I kicked ass."

Wrath spikes up my spine to the base of my skull. I'm hot and murderous. They used Quinlan's love against her. Her kindness. Her giant heart and the fear that's been sown into her life ever since she was five.

Quinlan's thumbs are soft on my skin. Her reverent touch is sweet.

I fucking love her hands. I love covering her wrists and feeling her pulse.

She's alive.

There'll be time and place for my wrath.

Soon.

"Yes, you did, little flame." I put my forehead to hers. "I'm so proud of you."

Rome would want to hold her. He already does. I have words to say, though, and so I push them out there.

"I've come to terms with the scar on my face. With how it's changed me. Why it's there in the first place, it's all done now. Today…" The breath I draw is hot, but the air doesn't burn my throat. The corners of my eyes don't sting. "I'm grateful for it. I'm grateful for each painful second. For every time I was mocked and ridiculed—"

"Liam."

"Shh. Let me finish. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me, Quinlan." My fingers dig deeper into her wrists. Desperate for her pulse. *Ta-dum. Ta-dum. Ta-dum.* So fucking strong. "I have you. I have us. I would have my entire body covered in scars if it meant I get to have this"—I crush my lips to hers for one last bruising kiss—"for all goddamn eternity."

"You wouldn't need to," she breathes. "I'm yours. Forever."

"Ours." Rome is all violence. It's pulsing from him. He's had enough waiting, and he's right. I release her for him to whirl her into his embrace. His fingers are in her hair, inspecting her. Inspecting the swelling. "You're ours. Always."

He growls at the wound. Glowers at it.

"My trophy." Quinlan raises her fingertips to it, and I hate how it must hurt. I hate how she smiles through the pain. She'll never hurt again unless it's us administering it. "For fucking them up. Our boxing classes were worth it."

"You…" He shakes his head while Damien and I split our attention between them and the worthless pieces of shit who dared kidnapping her. "*You're* worth it, sweetheart. I'd been so lost. So angry. A ticking time bomb, ready to detonate. Until I saw you. Until I had you."

"I don't want you to change." She sounds confused. "Don't change for me."

"I won't." His rough laugh is the happiest he's ever sounded. "I'm different, though. You're a balm to my soul. The tar, the poison, the hurt. They're gone. Quinlan, you take away the pain. You put love in there. I don't want to kill people as much when you're around. I just want *you*."

"Rome, I—"

There's rustling coming from the car.

"What—what is this?" A man's groan. Rex's.

"That bitch." Aria's anger is muffled.

They’re up.

Rome shoves Quinlan behind his back in an instant. He’s a shield between her and the threat.

Damien reaches for Rex. I squeeze in through the passenger door to get to Aria.

I’m more than happy to watch the horror and indignance in her black eyes and how they flutter shut when I knock her out with one blow to her cheek.

“Hey there, Rex.”

“Get the fuck off me.”

Damien laughs, the sound humorless. Abrasive.

“Lights out, motherfucker.”

WATERBOARDING IS ILLEGAL.

No one’s ever said anything about gasolineboarding.

Ha. A joke coming from me instead of Damien.

Revenge turns me into this funny person. My sanity is kind of frayed around the edges, I think.

Do I care?

Fuck. No.

A cruel, unfamiliar laugh bursts out of me. Must be a direct response to Aria’s screams.

Or is it from Quinlan’s smile? From her hand rubbing my shoulder and her sweet voice in my ear?

She says, “Don’t stop. Don’t stop. Don’t stop,” and that’s funny for no other reason than just because.

I do what she says. I don’t stop, dousing Aria’s mouth and nose with gasoline.

Damien presses the cloth to her face. She struggles and I spill more gasoline. He’s laughing for a few seconds, and when he’s done, his smile lingers on his face.

Rome smiles too. He’s done fastening the rope around the naked Rex’s wrists and ankles. The man won’t be able to get off the chair Rome has bound him to. Ever.

The tank is empty by the time Rome joins us, hovering over Aria from Damien’s side.

There’s more where that came from. Gas, I mean. Not people. There are no more people. Only us.

Quinlan and her giant smile, the three of us with our sleeves rolled up to our forearms. With resolve in our hearts.

My family.

That has to be the reason for all this…happiness. For why I can’t seem to control my smile.

That, and that Quinlan’s okay. She didn’t just make it out alive. She took care of these bastards. Did what she had to—and did it fucking well—until we showed up.

Other than her cheek, she’s not injured. We checked her, of course we did, stripping her, there in the dark alley, to make sure there were no bruises. There were none. She didn’t flinch when we ran our hands over her body. Everything was intact.

Then we had to come up with a new plan. And fast.

The zip ties Damien had been keeping in the trunk of his SUV came first. Those were for emergencies, AKA for Jagger.

His clients could get aggressive, though he hadn’t asked Damien for help more than once. Jagger had to lock up an unpaying, violent fuck in his bathroom this one time. That’s when he called Damien. That one incident was enough for Damien. He’s always prepared.

Quinlan heard that story while Damien dug them out. She *aw*ed at how considerate he was before demanding to meet Jagger when he came back.

By some dumb luck, no car pulled into the alley. One person crossed the street, minding his own business. Thank fuck for cellphones.

The rest—wiping Aria’s taxi and calling the crew we’d hired on retainer for this exact moment—wasn’t luck. Years of planning had brought us to that moment. We hadn’t anticipated this particular mess. Having people and money to deal with the unexpected, though, that helped.

Now, here we are, at a remote warehouse on the outskirts of Chicago. We left the scene squeaky clean and, more importantly, again…

Quinlan is okay.

So, while being happy is fine, drowning in it is not. Losing my mind will have to wait.

“All done.” I bark another laugh, hurtling the orange container to the other side of the warehouse.

It *clicks* and *clacks* on the cement floor. *Click* and *Clack.*

Well, I guess my temporary insanity won’t go away. Maybe I should just try to tamp it down.

“You got some on you.” Quinlan looks at my arm. At the drop of gasoline that’s missed Aria’s mouth and landed on my forearm.

“That bothers you?”

Her eyes are wide as she gazes at me. Smiling. “No.”

“Me either.” I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

Then I watch the drop of gas trickling down my forearm and onto the floor. All while Aria gurgles and coughs. Chokes and sputters.

Unpleasant noises from an unpleasant person.

“Quinlan, please, talk to them,” Rex, who hears Aria struggling for air, shouts. “Kid, I didn’t do anything. Tell them to let me go. Dad needs me.”

Quinlan turns her head to him. Slow. Not because she can’t stand the sight of him. Not because she’s scared of him.

The movement reminds me of a predator. Her eyes squint in Rex’s direction, despite him being hidden by Rome’s large frame.

“Rome.”

“No.” My friend stands tall, refusing to get out of the way. He’s protecting her.

“But our little flame doesn’t need protecting.” I bend to kiss her temple. “Does she?”

“I’m good.” Without averting her gaze, she squeezes my filthy forearm. Growls.

“Quinlan.” A threat. Coming from Rex.

Now it’s my turn to gaze past Rome’s shoulder. I look at Rex. And I’m furious.

So is Damien. He keeps the cloth on Aria’s face, shouting over his shoulder. “Don’t you dare say her name again.”

“Fuck you.”

“I can handle that.” Damien winks at Quinlan. “I will indeed fuck her by the end of the day.”

She blushes, her eyelids fluttering at Damien while Rex curses. Her brow furrows when her half-brother won’t shut up, her head snapping in his direction. Fuck, her fury is hot. It even sends a chill up my spin. Damien’s expression grows solemn at the sight, his eyes darkening.

“What would it be, sweetheart?” Rome hasn’t moved, shielding her whether she likes it or not. “You want us to let him go?”

A smirk quirks on Quinlan's lips. A wicked one. When Rex screams another, "Please," it's obvious he senses the shift in her.

Unlike me, she can be as unhinged as much as she'd like. Let loose. Nothing will happen to her when she's losing it while we're around.

Before she answers, her attention shifts to Rome's face. "Never."

Rome nods. "I'll handle him, then."

He spins on his heel, still blocking Rex from Quinlan's view. I take her face in my hands while Aria squeals and screams. I do that because I have to kiss her. I do it so she won't have to look at her half-brother while Rome shuts him up with a duct-tape from the metal table.

As she kisses me back, I give her everything I have. Damien leans in, one of his hands curling around the back of her neck, pushing her to me. Together, we spare her from looking at that fuckface. Together, we coax pleasured sounds out of her.

Until I hear the duct tape tear and Rex's screams are silenced. Until Rome is back.

Damien releases her at the same time I do, the three of us breathing hard. My cock throbs for her swollen lips to wrap around it.

But two people who should be dead are still alive. I can fuck her face later.

I *will* fuck her face later.

"I hate his voice." Rome's lip curls in a derisive smirk. "How'd you stand it?"

"I didn't." Damien tugs on one end of the cloth, pulling it toward the floor, then the other, then back again. Wiping Aria's face like one would a bowling ball, rubbing the gasoline into her pores. Grinning as he keeps talking. "Some days I wonder what was worse, listening to him or having him cut me. Hmm." He gazes up, wondering while he's wiping, wiping, wiping Aria's face. Back to Rome. "The voice. That was worse."

"Was never a fan of it, either." Quinlan's grin widens. She fishes the Zippo we bought in a rest stop on the drive over, flicks it open. We got one for each of us, and they're heavy in my pants pocket.

I don't miss the one I left on my office floor. Don't miss it at all. I'm getting my revenge with or without it.

"So, what's the plan?" She snaps the Zippo shut, taking a step toward me. Our chests brush. I can practically feel her heart beating. "Are you going to drown her some more, or is it time to light a fire?"

Aria yells, “Noooo,” choking and coughing as the gasoline burns through her throat.

“Fire.” I grab a lock of Aria’s hair, raise it in the air between the four of us, much like I did to Ginnie all those years ago.

It disgusts me now, to touch another woman. To touch *her*. I do it anyway. One last time. Making sure she dies a slow, agonizing death is what we’re here for.

“Help!” Aria thrashes, doing her very best to free herself.

It’s a wasted breath, telling her it’s impossible. We tied a rope around her neck, tied the other side of it to one of the legs of the chair. What’s more, we’re in the middle of nowhere. Her strangled cries for help will be heard by no one.

There’ll be no getting out of this.

She’s trapped.

Just like she trapped me.

I pull my rest stop Zippo out of my pocket and *flick*. “Who’s in the dark closet now, bitch?”

“You were always a bastard,” Aria grumbles. Her body straining against the restraints, and I can see the rope digging into her neck. Wonderful. “You burned your own goddamn self. You’re a joke. Let me go, you freak. I don’t deserve this.”

“I have to disagree.” The flame catches her gasoline doused hair. “You deserve nothing.”

I release the soaked strand before it reaches my fingers. Damien releases the cloth to keep himself out of the racing flame’s path. It sneaks higher and higher toward her scalp.

She screams and yanks her body left and right. Pushing against the restraints. A futile fucking attempt.

The heat must scorch her. The pain of fire meeting flesh is agony.

I should know.

I felt it once, what I put Aria through now. Flames lick her cheeks. Her ears. Her mouth.

In a sick sort of way, the sight of her being eaten alive by the fire doesn’t trigger me. Doesn’t take me back to that day.

The smoke. The smell of my burnt flesh.

That’s closure.

Besides, I couldn't get upset when Quinlan *oooh*s and *ahhh*s at the sight. The flames eat up Aria's hair, her face, and my little flame pulls at my arm, sneaking smiles my way.

My monster still has some area on her body where the flames haven't reached yet.

My finger tilts Quinlan's face up to me. "You want to play?"

"Please. I need it." Embers flicker in Quinlan's eyes. She told me once she saw embers in my eyes, and I didn't get it. Looking into her hungry eyes, I finally do. "Can the three of us go?"

Adorable, how she's asking for my permission. Especially when the answer is obvious.

"Of course."

A kiss to her forehead and Quinlan's off. She twists to Aria, doing what she's been yearning to do over the last couple of weeks.

Flick. Quinlan Spins the Zippo's wheel. Snaps it close.

"What's wrong?" I wrap a hand around her nape.

The flames will swallow Aria alive, whether Quinlan adds to them or not. I don't care about that. I care about what's going on in her head.

Chin up, smile wide. She looks around at the three of us, returning to meet my eyes. "Together."

"Together." Easiest answer I've ever had to give.

Four Zippos flick over Aria's burning head. Four sets of eyes meeting.

This isn't what I imagined it to be. Me and three other people—*my* people—setting flames to Aria's skin. I imagined Rome and Damien watching over me. I imagined hatred followed by detachment.

This, how we stand here as one, far surpasses anything I had in mind.

Words like *home*, *family*, *peace of mind* and *revenge* are all inadequate.

I'm whole.

Or more like I will be.

Once we're finished with Rex.

Once I make sure Aria is well and truly gone. I have to make sure she's dead.

Have to.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Damien

ACRID STENCH OF SCORCHED flesh.

Blistering skin turning black under bright orange flames.

Screams so loud they pierce my ears.

For long minutes, I stare at Aria as she's burning on the chair.

Was that what Liam saw when the flames ate at his skin in that closet? Was this what he smelled? While he was there, burning alive? All by himself?

With that cunt ignoring his screams.

With no one to save him.

A smirk curved my lips when we put the Zippos to Aria's face. It's gone now.

The more I watch her face incinerate, the less I feel anything remotely close to satisfaction. To amusement.

Hearing Liam's story and actually experiencing it are two different things.

Aria's screams are silenced, eventually. She dies, the motherfucking cunt.

If she were still alive, this would be the moment I killed her. Personally. I'd lock my hands around her burning throat and choke the life out of her.

Identical homicidal energies vibrate from Rome at my side. From Quinlan in front of me. Anger is a living thing between us.

“I would’ve spit on her repulsive face.” Rome grunts his agreement, answering my unspoken hatred. “Except it would put some of the fire out. And fuck that.”

We keep watching.

Her hair and face are black and garbled and deformed. Nothing, really.

“She doesn’t deserve your spit.” Liam isn’t finished with her.

Even when the psycho bitch is clearly dead, he picks up another gasoline tank. Raises it. Tips the heavy container over Aria’s chest.

His eyes are unfocused. His jaw tics.

“L.” Quinlan. Sweet, murderous, and beautiful Quinlan. She sees him. Truly sees him.

This isn’t surface-level bullshit. She can tell, much like I do—and I bet Rome as well—that he’s struggling. Floating somewhere, same as Quinlan does after we’re rough on her.

Liam’s up there, high on revenge. On justice.

I wouldn’t have the first clue on how to help him down. I mean, sure, I’d let him empty the gasoline tank on Aria. Let him set fire to every inch of her body. It’s his revenge. I’d never take it from him.

Advice, warmth, a show of compassion, though? I don’t have it in me. Rome doesn’t either. Not now with thoughts of Liam burning in that damned closet.

Quinlan does. No matter what her current state is, she has it in her to find him. Bring him home.

Her fingers are delicate around his forearm. Her gaze soft.

His eyes come to focus the longer he looks at Quinlan.

With this simple touch and few words, Quinlan helps him navigate through the bad stuff. She reaches inside him and hugs the terrified boy he was. She pulls out the man he’s become and shows him that he’s made it. He’s slayed the wicked witch. He can burn her all he wants, and after that, he can rest.

When Quinlan was born, I thought she was brought to this earth to save me. Me and Jagger and Laurel.

A foolish notion, really.

I’ve always been bound to my two best friends. It only makes sense that she’d be their savior too.

“Liam.” Her full lips move to the shape of his name.

“Little flame.” He gulps, his shoulders relaxing.

“You did it.”

I’m anything but jealous as her fingers roam over his arm. I feel it as though they’re on me.

Rex groans and rocks on the chair we nailed to the floor behind us.

Finally, the smile is back on my face, my eyes locked on my friends. This moment is ours.

One deep inhale, and Liam’s smiling too. “Yes. We did it. Together.”

Rome places his hand on my shoulder, both of us silent spectators as Liam leans in to Quinlan. The tank remains in his grip.

He’ll go through with it. Will spill that gasoline on Aria. Though it won’t be the same. It won’t come from a place of despair. She won’t have the upper hand.

Before he destroys what’s left of Aria, he kisses Quinlan. He groans at the touch of her hand on the side of his neck.

When he pulls back, he’s back to being himself.

There’s not a drop left in the second tank by the time he’s done dousing the rest of Aria’s body.

“Together.” He covers Quinlan’s palm with his. They share a smile I could never forget. A smile I’ve been dying to see on Liam’s face.

They turn to us, and Rome and I know what to do.

More flames curl across Aria’s shoulders, arms, and her clothes and flesh. The ropes burn. The chair burns.

All of it will be gone soon.

Our job is done.

“Dame,” Liam says.

“Yeah?” I tilt my head, hands and Zippo in my pockets.

“You had a plan.” He jerks his chin at the man behind me. Quinlan’s quiet, studying my expression. Seeing through me. “For him.”

I did have a plan.

I planned to hurt him by kidnapping his little half-sister. Torturing his soul before I put my hands to his flesh. Carving his skin. Sinking a knife to his flesh. Pulling his heart out like he tore out mine when he tortured Jagger and Laurel and made me watch. All the days I wasn’t home to save them. All the times he cut me.

That *was* the plan.

My blood still sings at the prospect of cutting him until he dies. My fingers still itch to grip the handle of the knife.

I’m the same bloodthirsty motherfucker I’ve been for over twenty-three years.

Unless Quinlan has other things in mind.

She could ask me to call everything off. Or worse. Tell me she wants to leave so she wouldn’t have to witness me killing him.

That wouldn’t make me change my plans. No, I refuse to believe it would. Rex is dying tonight.

For what he did to Jagger. To Laurel.

To me.

Most of all, to Quinlan.

Rome’s hand isn’t on my shoulder anymore. The smoke from Aria’s body isn’t as suffocating. Liam’s heavy attention is light. Barely there.

My mind is clearer, yes. I can think.

Quinlan has been begging—no, *demanding*—that I let her out. That we kill Rex together. Hell, she broke out of our apartment to get the job done herself. Except this isn’t a hypothetical situation anymore.

This is her half-brother, after all.

She could be repulsed by what I’ll do to him.

Will you?

Quinlan’s gray eyes stare at me, emotion flashing through them.

This is the moment I open my fucking mouth. Ask her to join me.

The moment I pick the sharp knife off the table, order Quinlan to grab hers.

Fuck, I’m a prick for wishing she’d stand at my side. I’m a bastard for wanting her to tell me *together* before we kill him.

Quinlan said that to Rome, then Liam.

I crave that for myself so badly that my chest caves in on itself.

And just in case the unimaginable happens, that she tells me she can’t stand here and allow for this to happen, I would—

“Damien.”

Would I really ignore her, or would I drop it? Leave the job to the professionals so Quinlan could still be mine after tonight?

Nothing could be more wrong than walking away from this.

Nothing could be worse than losing her.

Quinlan doesn’t call my name again. What would I fucking tell her, anyway?

Please be okay with what I’m about to do? Please do it with me?

You can’t force that on a person.

My feet carry me a step back. My gaze is locked on hers. The same magnetic pull I’ve had toward her for years is still there. Twenty-three of them, to be exact. She saved me.

She’s been my everything.

I have to kill Rex. Have to slaughter him. Use my bare goddamn hands.

I need to do it.

Neither Rome nor Liam say anything either. They’re statues, only their gazes following Quinlan. Mine do the same.

She’s walking, and I watch her.

I’m bloodthirsty. Straining to finish this story once and for all.

And I. Watch. Her.

I’m curious. Damaged. Hopeful. So goddamn hopeful.

Quietly, she heads to the table and stops there. Her tattoo shines in the fluorescent light, the skin beneath it swollen and purple.

Her chest heaves with each breath. Her arm moves. Hand covering the handle of the knife I put there for her.

There are four knives in the warehouse, just like there are numerous gas containers.

Quinlan doesn’t grab one knife, though. She takes two of them, walking over to me. Her face gives me nothing.

Rome steps aside when she’s close. She slams the knife to my chest. Scowls at me. Lets me watch the anger bleeding from her pores.

Christ, I love her.

No matter what she says next, I love that flare of rage. Her scrunching nose. Those swollen, pressed lips.

This is the answer I’ve been too nervous to ask.

I clasp my hand on top of hers, pin hers closer to my chest. Give her a taste of what she does to me. How alive I am because of her.

“The bitch was already dead.” Aria, she means. “Liam needed to let it go. That’s why I stopped him from pouring gas before I saw he was okay. She didn’t deserve it, fucking with his head.”

“She’s right.” Liam’s solemn. Concise. Relieved.

“This isn’t the case with us, Damien.” The last of her restraint starts to snap. She growls, pressing her chest to mine, the knives mashed between us. “You owe me to kill him. You fucking promised.”

Behind us, Rex’s muffled screams and groans are a background noise. The last of the flames are taking care of Aria’s remains. My friends are breathing.

Fuck, *I’m* breathing. I’m smiling.

I let the knife stay pressed between us and touch her. Quinlan’s chin feels right in my grasp, her hair soft in my fist.

“You have no idea what you do to me.” My teeth bite into her bottom lip so hard I taste blood. I taste war. Survival. Revenge. I lick it off her. Suck it into my mouth, taking it for myself. “No goddamn idea, darling.”

“Let’s do it.” Her eyes sparkle. Alive. So alive. Even—fuck, no, *especially*—when I yank harder on her hair. “He has to pay for what he’s done. To you, to your friends.”

“This is for you, more than anyone else.” Kissing her is as inevitable as breathing. “He won’t apologize. Won’t mean it, that’s for sure. You’re owed this.”

“*We* do,” she insists.

“Okay. Okay. We do.”

Her teeth are white and perfect as her face splits into a wide smile. A deviant one. She knows what I’m waiting for.

That damn word.

She makes me wait.

Her hand on my chest flips carefully, brings the knife up between us. Asking me to take it from her. I remove my fingers from her chin, and she shoves the knife into my hand.

Still, nothing. Even when I tug on her hair.

I. Need. To. Hear. It.

“Quinlan,” I warn. I’m back to being this beast. The man behind the suit smirks.

Hell-bent on revenge. Hard on torturing her. The man who’s finally got the girl.

Her free hand hikes her shirt up, revealing her marked belly. Her scars are gorgeous. Three stripes for the three men who’ll love her to their dying breath.

“Put your hands on me.” Quinlan completely ignores her half-brother’s muted protests.

My two best friends gather around us. Their support is as strong as it’s ever been.

All the things we wrote in our notebook. All the plans we've made. The support we've given each other through the years.

This isn't ideal, our situation. We'll never have a fairytale ending. Our starting point was rotten to the core. Our souls will forever be dark and twisted.

There's no changing that.

I'm not sure either of us wants that.

Quinlan included. Her depraved sense of justice is as violent and unapologetic as ours.

With three right hands flattened on her toned stomach, we're on the path to closure. The scars on our fingers cover the ones on her skin.

Yeah. Full motherfucking circle.

"Quinlan." I need the word from her. Need the approval.

She'll give it to me. Or she'll be punished until she does.

Either works for me.

Quinlan's head twists slowly so the three of us can see the sincerity in her eyes. The madness. What a beautiful fucking mess she's turned into.

"Together."

Christ, finally.

"Darling." I drop the knife to the floor.

I'll pick it up after I kiss her.

Rex wouldn't have to worry about an infection. Ha-ha. Very funny.

I'll have time to joke about it later.

The knife clatters on the floor, the sound dulled by my growl into Quinlan's mouth. By her moan. I'm a slave to her mouth. The master of her tongue. I'm owned, and I own her and, *fuck*, her skin beneath my fingers is like a hit of goddamn crack. That's how addictive it is, touching her. Burying my fingers in her soft hair.

Fuck.

"Go. I'll be right there, brother," she says a second before Rome steals her, right before his lips devour hers.

Her voice is innocent. Adorable.

Totally inappropriate. She shouldn't have smiled like that, with the stench of Aria's rotting corpse and Rex's sounds of protest. She does anyway.

While Rome kisses her as violently as only he knows, I pick up the knife off the floor. A dark laugh escapes me as I slowly turn to face my nemesis.

I won't be alone. Not for long.

Together.

“Rex, buddy.” I’m not gentle as I tear the duct tape off his mouth. “Missed me?”

He groans. Curses. His brown eyes are wide. Mad. “You have no right to kill me.”

“You’re really going for Aria’s line of defense?” I bark a laugh, swirling the knife in my hand. “Didn’t work out so well for her.”

“Fuck her.” He wets his lips, and I swallow back the need to gag. His tongue is repulsive. He’s repulsive. “I don’t deserve this. Me.”

A pause is followed by more growling sounds. Liam’s kissing her.

“Okay, whatever. Say I’m in a playful mood. Say I care for your opinion.” I run the tip of the knife along his bare collarbone. When he flinches, I tsk at him. Mocking him. “Let’s hear it. What makes you think I should spare you?”

“Well…”

The footsteps behind me indicate my short time alone with Rex is done.

He doesn’t answer, and, oh no, my patience has run out.

The knife dives into his left leg, right over his knee.

“Jesus fuck,” Rex screams.

I pretend not to hear him, sliding it up his thigh. The sharp knife and my resolve make it so I slice through flesh. Through muscle. I go deeper, down to his femur.

Quinlan giggles when she reaches me. Her hand rests possessively on my arm. She bends next to me, her hair tickling my cheek.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” she growls at Rex, sounding a lot like someone I know. Like me.

Good girl.

“Whore.”

“I’d warn you not to call her a whore again.”

The knife out of his thigh doesn’t mean relief. It’s more painful. He screams and blood spurts out, dripping out of the gash and onto the floor.

I don’t stick around to find out if I hit an artery or not.

I fling the knife in the air. The blade slashes a fine strip across Rex’s cheek. Blood trickles from the cut.

Would you look at that? I was an inch from taking his eye out. I hope Quinlan doesn’t think I’m a failure.

“Try me.” I wipe the bloodied blade on Rex’s other cheek. On his eye.

Liam takes a swipe at his forearm, slicing through his flesh. Rome slashes a line across his stomach.

“No? No more whore?”

He shakes his head, his eyes furious.

“That’s better. Still…” Despite the humor in my voice, I’m furious. No one disrespects our woman. “You’re dying tonight.”

“I told you,” the fucker grits out, his body arching forward, muscles strained. His face grows paler by the second. “You have no right to kill me. I’m the reason you met this whore—”

“No, you aren’t.” This time, I do go for his eye. I grab Rex by his short hair, and before he says another filthy word, I cut through his eyeball. Corner to corner.

Red pushes out the white. This isn’t a trickle. Oh, no. Blood gushes out, some gray matter too.

“I would’ve met her with or without you, fuckface.”

Quinlan’s *aww* behind me draws out more truths out of me.

“I would’ve found her in any other lifetime. Any other universe. Any fucking time and space. Nothing would’ve kept me from getting to Quinlan.” I’m staring down at him, but I’m talking to her. Even when she’s gone from my side. She’s close by. She’ll never leave, I know that now. “This has nothing to do with you, you piece of shit. Quinlan, I, Rome, and Damien, we’re fated. Meant to be. You just happened to be there.”

“You won’t anymore.” Quinlan materializes on the other side of Rex.

Her eyes glisten, unshed tears brimming in them. Emotion threatens to pour from her, and it’s so sweet.

I damn near stab Rex in the heart, haul her over my shoulder and—No, I’ll just fuck her right here on the floor. That’s what I’ll do. Liam and Rome will join us.

I do no such thing.

She’s owed this.

She’s owed the feeling of jabbing her knife into Rex’s unharmed cheek. To sink it up to the handle.

“Why did you lie?” Quinlan removes the knife from Rex’s flesh.

Blood covers every inch of the metal. She shoves it through Rex’s nose horizontally, the tip of the blade coming out on the other end.

He’s screaming. Fucking earned it.

“Why? Answer me?”

She pulls the knife out of his nose and down his shoulder it goes. She's gorgeous, growling and psychotic. Screaming is beneath her. She's just mad and vengeful. Her actions do the screaming for her.

"What are you talking, you bi—"

"I wouldn't say that if I were you." Rome shakes his head once. The threatening gesture shuts Rex up.

"My brother." She's in his face, her hand gripping his bleeding chin.

The look of confusion on his bleeding, disgraceful face lasts for one second.

"Blake?"

"Shut up. Don't you dare say his name." Quinlan's knife goes into the open wound in Rex's arm, into the one Liam gave him. "Tell me why."

I move around him, coming to stand next to her. Liam and Rome are around us, the three of us touching her. Grabbing her. Protecting her.

Rex wouldn't get up to hurt her, no. Whatever she hears, though, might hurt her. He'll do his best to break her.

I'd kill him before he manages to do that.

Rex's blood is only the appetizer. I'm hungry for more.

I'd have killed him by now. Put an end to his filthy mouth and the pain he's about to unleash on Quinlan.

But I won't take this from her. The closure.

"Why should I tell you anything?" With each word, blood splutters down his chin. His bare chest. She releases her grip on him, wiping her hand on his chest where blood hasn't reached yet. "I'm going to die tonight. You've made my life a living hell over this last month. Might as well go out while I make your life a nightmare. Your parents will never tell you anything; we both know that. So no. I'm not talking."

Oh, boy. His taunting is like a meal to a starved man.

"You got that right." I shove two fingers into the gaping wound in his cheek.

The one our brave Quinlan is responsible for. I sink the knife into his shoulder, then add two fingers to the party, pulling on the flesh of his cheek. Tearing it wider. Huffing a derisive laugh at his agonized howl.

"You will die here." The corners of the gash on Rex's cheek rip wider. The sound is obnoxious, and he wails at the pain. I regret nothing. "Sure, you can be the monster you've always been. You can keep being an asshole to Quinlan. Go right the fuck ahead."

Quinlan wraps an arm around my waist. Squeezes me.

How did I ever think she'd be against this?

I'm not a believer. Lost my faith over the nights and days of pain and guilt I spent in Rex's home. But fuck, God, thank you for this. Thank you for her.

Or maybe thank you, universe?

Whatever.

When she holds me like that and I have my two best friends at my side, I don't care about any-fucking-thing.

His skin falls like red curtains when I release him. I wipe my hands on my pants, looking at him.

Technically, I'm done. I got what I came here for.

Unfortunately for him, he messed up.

He had to fuck with Quinlan.

No. one. Fucks. With. What's. Ours.

"I'll be here. The four of us will." I stick my thumb up, motioning to the people behind me. "We'll stop the bleeding in your thigh. Wait it out, you know? We can stay here for months. Remove patches of skin one by one. Take our sweet time with you. We'll tend to your wounds. Keep them from festering."

I lean forward until I'm everything he sees. Until I stare into the eyes that used to scare the ever-loving fuck out of me.

Now, they're nothing. Now, one of them bleeds out. The other has fear written all over it.

"Yes, Rex," Quinlan spits out his name. Her cheek is warm next to mine. "Because who'll come looking for you? Mom and Dad sure won't. Their doctors won't, either. I'll contact them myself. Say you're on a *vacation*. Maeve will be happy to get rid of you. You're a liability, remember?"

His eyebrows shoot up on his pale, sweaty forehead. He fights the pain. His surprise, that shit he can't hide.

He could tell we were following him. The fact that we heard just about everything is news. Everything other than his plotting with Aria.

Goddamn it.

"You're going to play doctor, dummy?" The derogatory nickname he'd given me. It doesn't hurt me. His confidence is fake. He knows we have him by the balls. "I looked you up. Neither of you are doctors. Your little foster siblings wouldn't have the first idea, either."

“Aww.” The knife I had in him slips out like butter, the handle warm and slippery in my palm. I gather some gore from his cheek on the blade—the shit that used to be in his eye. And he opens up his mouth for me to feed him with it. “Swallow, motherfucker. That’s it. I hope you enjoy your last meal.”

“Bon appétit,” Quinlan says with a sweet, all wrong French accent.

Then she gives me the filthiest French kiss. Tongue and all.

“And for your question. The Internet is filled with answers to everything these days,” Rome booms behind me, ignoring my depravity. “We’re fast learners.”

“Or we’ll hire a doctor, then kill them when we’re done with you,” Liam adds.

Quinlan doesn’t protest. She knows we won’t kill an innocent.

Rex, in his pathetic state, believes we’d do just about anything.

“Fine. Fuck.” Dampness hits my chin. I look to the right and there’s blood on Quinlan’s chin too. Rex’s. I wipe it from her pretty face. “I did it for Dad.”

My arm wraps around Quinlan’s waist all on its own. I straighten the both of us, and two other hands come to rest on her back. To comfort her.

“The three of you were fucked up.” Rex blinks, grunting against the pain.

The eyelashes where I sliced his eye are coated in blood and gore. He’s a mean one, always has been. Doesn’t cry. Doesn’t beg for mercy even as his skin turns ashen gray.

“Dad told me about how he and your mom lied to the police. Said he’d regret it as soon as they were by themselves.” The words are slurred. He’s losing consciousness. I tug at the skin of his cheek, and he groans, the pain waking him up. “When it was you and them. I was already there. You were crying for Blake. Kept saying you were sorry. You could’ve taken it. I loved you, but I couldn’t afford them going to prison. Couldn’t take care of a kid on my own. Being a foster dad was the worst year of my life.”

“Yours?” I hear the incredulous question coming out of me. Echoed from around me. Times three.

“You were such a goddamn hassle. I told her. The three of you.”

Nothing and no one gets in my way. We pulled the truth out of him, and I can’t hold back. Blinded by rage, I carve into his stomach.

I’m not being loving or gentle like I was the day I marked Quinlan. I’m vicious and cruel. I bark a harsh, inhuman laugh as Rex’s skin breaks.

His guts appear when I open his stomach up, and I laugh at that too.

“I couldn’t take you on, Quinlan,” he whispers, fighting to say the words that’ll set him free.

“So you let me think Blake’s death was all my fault?”

While I slash into Rex, while I pay him back for every crime he’s ever committed, Quinlan moves closer, lands a punch to his jaw. I don’t care that more blood lands on my shirt. I’m so goddamn proud of her.

He’s breathing hard. She continues anyway. “You let me think I could save him and I didn’t?”

“A-An investment.”

At that, I stop. My head snaps up. There it is. The truth. The horrible, gut-wrenching truth that I wish with all my heart was a lie.

“A what?” Her voice falters.

“Investment. I made sure you felt guilty so I could have a chance at a better future,” Rex huffs. “I helped them out with food and small things. They weren’t getting better. I couldn’t be there every day to take care of them. Fuck, I hate taking care of people. That’s where your guilt came in handy. Kept you in line, didn’t it? It did. There. You got what your explanation. Can you just end this and kill me?”

White-hot fury takes over. I’m reduced to this primitive creature, not even a beast. Not a monster. I don’t know what the fuck I am. All I know is that I have to put Rex down.

Every other second that he’s breathing the same air as Quinlan is a goddamn crime.

My friends share my rage. Our sweet Quinlan shares it.

Blades slice through the air. Every unharmed piece of Rex’s skin gets cut, sliced, torn open. I do what I’ve dreamed of for too long, delve my hand into his chest. Wrap my hand around his heart.

The organ that somehow keeps Rex alive beats slowly. Weak, like the motherfucker who ruined so many lives. Useless piece of shit.

I squeeze it tighter. “This is for you, darling.”

No one’s moving a muscle as they stare at me. As they watch me bend my elbow and tug at his heart.

“Jagger.” Another squeeze. Another harsh glare at the man who’s been reduced to a human colander. “Laurel.”

Quinlan pushes her hand through Rex’s body, cupping my hand. Destroying his heart with me.

Her gray eyes have never been more beautiful than they are at this very moment. Her intensity steals my breath away. Gives me back a piece of my humanity back.

“For you,” she growls.

Liam’s palm comes on top of hers. Rome places his on top of Liam’s.

“For you,” they repeat.

Air surges into my lungs. A sense of reckoning. Of closure.

I milk the life out of what remains of Rex’s heart. My fist closes in, and I smile.

I smile because I killed him.

I smile because I got my revenge.

I smile because my life can finally start.

The worst is behind us.

I’m home.

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EPILOGUE

Rome

"CAN I GET YOU something to drink, Ms. Palmer?" Sadie, the flight attendant, smiles at Quinlan first. "A mimosa, maybe? I squeezed the orange juice myself right before you boarded."

Our private plane boarded fifteen minutes ago. We're flying domestic, going to meet Liam's parents like we should have months ago. They were busy with work.

We had other matters to attend to.

First, we waited for Jagger and his girlfriend to return from their vacation around the world. We lent them the plane for as long as they liked.

Damien's foster brother had helped us in more ways than one. Even if he didn't, it wouldn't have mattered. He's a part of the family. We have more money than we know what to do with. He could've asked to borrow the plane for five years and we would've still said yes. Gladly.

But Jagger didn't need years. The couple had spent a month in Southeast Asia, then traveled to Paris, where he met with Anne and Nick, Laurel and her husband. They were excited to meet Quinlan. Laurel went as far as to deem Quinlan her new sister.

It's a second sister Quinlan has now, since Anne claimed she'd licked her first.

Damien, Laurel, and Jagger had some alone time on that day we spent together. The three of them had conversations they couldn't have over the

phone, no matter how secure our lines are.

We celebrated. We had fun.

Then we came back home.

There was business to attend to. A front to maintain, in case anyone connected the dots between the strange disappearances of Joseph and Elaine, Aria and Rex. No one was supposed to. It made no sense that anyone would.

We did it anyway, returned here after a day. At home, we made a public announcement to deliver a statement about us being the real partners in BLF Capital. Our names are everywhere now.

We're done hiding. Done planning. Done plotting.

Life is good.

So here we are, in our private plane, with the brushed metal finishes and expensive wood decorations. Sitting in plush leather seats wearing casual slacks and white button-downs on the way to Miami.

Everything screams casual, fun vacation.

I'm anything but relaxed.

The thought of Quinlan and alcohol…

The vein in my head throbs. Raw skin stretches across my knuckles as I grip the arms of my seat.

My gaze is latched on to one thing.

One person.

Quinlan. Sitting across from me in a flowy black dress that matches the ballet flats on her feet. The outfit the three of us chose for her this morning. An outfit meant for comfort.

Meant to accommodate a swelling belly.

Our woman is beautiful. Ethereal. Gorgeous.

Her lips curve upward. From the corner of my eye, it's obvious Liam's glowering at Sadie too. She doesn't notice, her full attention fixed on Quinlan. She has that effect on people. More so recently.

Damien, who's at Quinlan's side, squeezes her hand. The one with the giant ten-carat brilliant round cut on her ring finger. Her engagement ring.

His expression is neutral, eyes warm. He's so mesmerized by her that he probably didn't hear what our flight attendant just asked.

Alcohol. Motherfucking alcohol.

Quinlan did hear her, though.

She opens her mouth to answer Sadie’s question. She’s going to do it by herself. Be nice about it.

I’m too pissed for niceties. Too pissed that Sadie could’ve missed how Quinlan *glows*.

“No mimosa.” The bite in my voice is audible. No one scolds me for being rude, least of all Quinlan. Her soft smile says she loves my overprotectiveness. “Christ, can’t you tell she’s pregnant?”

Whose babies are there, there’s no telling. Not yet. All the doctors could tell us this early in her pregnancy is that there are three.

Three fucking babies.

We went back and forth over this. Over the two weeks when we assumed Quinlan had conceived, a little over a month before the flight to Paris.

The three of us fucked her. Bare. Raw. And just so we wouldn’t leave anything to chance, we shoved our cum back inside her.

So there was no way of telling whose babies are inside there. Mine, Liam’s, Damien’s. The three of ours. Could be. It could happen with twins, why not triplets?

None of that mattered, though, that early in the pregnancy.

Quinlan’s well-being did. The babies’ did.

That was the second reason we stayed back in Chicago instead of taking her to meet Liam’s parents right away.

The third reason was that we helped put her parents in a proper facility. With their consent, clearly. They’re in the best mental hospital money can afford, being treated by the best professionals out there.

Her family is far from her, but she hasn’t been lonely. Never.

We were always there, taking turns to stay with her at home for her morning sickness. Those were awful. Broke my fucking heart to be this helpless against every wave of nausea. Every sprint to the bathroom.

I’m not too proud to admit that, other than being torn about her pain, I was scared.

Sure, I’d learned a lot about women through Anne. What tampons to buy and what dress goes with what heels.

Throwing up and shaking and crying? I had no fucking clue what to do about that.

We were there, though, anyway, doing whatever we could. Came with her to every doctor’s appointment, all three of us. Showered and bathed her. Bought her a whole new wardrobe.

Anything, including a new workstation we had set in our living room. Despite our protests, she asked to keep working, and we couldn't resist her.

Just like we couldn't stop loving her.

We could never stop loving her.

Damien is the one who makes her laugh a second after she's done throwing up.

Liam has researched everything there is to learn about pregnancies. Ordered in a million different pillows and vitamins.

I, other than tending to her every need, fret over what she eats. I thought our pantry and fridge were adequately filled before. We added a new fridge ever since we got the news about her pregnancy. More shelves have been installed in the pantry.

I'm there to make sure she has whatever she wants at every hour of the day.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Mr. Langford." Sadie's face is flushed as she turns to Quinlan. "Ms. Palmer. I apologize, truly."

"You couldn't have known." Quinlan's face is even softer than before.

Her cheeks a deeper shade of pink. The color is back there after weeks of morning sickness. It's finally over. The fire is back in her eyes as well. Her gray eyes are a stormy night as she trails her gaze over me, Liam, then Damien.

She's done talking to Sadie.

She wants us. Our cocks and too many orgasms to count too, if I had to guess. She needs to come until she cries for us to stop. Until she's delirious and panting. A beautiful mess.

Pregnancy hormones have another effect on her than just morning sickness and food cravings.

They're making our Quinlan horny as fuck.

There's a room in the back of the plane to take care of that for her. Jesus, for us. I need to have my cock inside of her.

We have another thing to give her. That'll have to wait, even though I'm dying to start there. Except I can't. She needs us to take care of her pretty pussy, so that comes first.

"Yes, but—"

"Leave us," Liam quips. He sees what I do in Quinlan's gaze.

"If you come back before the plane lands"—Damien's expression is pure evil. He's been letting this side of him out these days. Quinlan asked him

that—“you’re fired, Ms. Mimosa.”

Sadie gasps. Who cares? I’m too engrossed in Quinlan’s tongue and its slow, seductive swipe along her bottom lip.

“What are you still doing here?” I stand to my full height.

She scurries out, gone in a matter of seconds.

I outstretch my hand to Quinlan. “You wanted something, Ms. Palmer?”

Her small palm lands in my much larger one. Damien has his hand on the small of her back and Liam has her other hand in his.

“I can walk by myself.” Her voice is thick with lust, her eyes playful.

She’s right. Our help isn’t unnecessary.

Our three babies have her swelling on her first trimester, but she’s still small. She could get up all on her own. But we love touching her. Can’t get enough of it.

“You wouldn’t be able to after we’re done with you.” Damien grazes his lips on the spot between her shoulder and neck.

Quinlan shivers, her breath hitching.

“We have hours, sweetheart.” I would have kissed her, except her clothes are on her, and that pisses me off as much as Ms. Mimosa had. “How many do you think we can squeeze until we land?”

“Rome.” Her blush deepens, reaching her delicate neck.

“I’d say more than five, and that’s underselling it.” Carefully, I take her in my arms and carry her to the back room.

“In three hours?” There’s a *clink* as Liam’s Zippo hits the table behind us. “Definitely underselling it.”

He got a new one for himself after the day in the warehouse. An identical golden Zippo like he bought the three of us. *In aeternum* is engraved on each one of them. Forever in Latin.

“What if I throw up?”

I get hard from the image she’s planted in my head. Desperate. Blind with need so primal that my bones howl for her. Quinlan being free to be herself around us is the biggest fucking turn-on imaginable.

“We’ll clean it up, sweetheart.” My lips press to the top of her head. “Then keep fucking you.”

“Oh.”

A partition separates the center of the plane and flight attendant area. It isn’t enough. Here, in the room in the back, we have a bed and a private

bathroom with a shower. More importantly, a wood door to keep everyone else outside.

Easier to violate Quinlan without having to worry that we'll have an audience.

"Come here." Damien helps her down, careful as he hugs her to his side. He lowers his lips to her ear. "You think there'll ever be a day we'll stop taking care of you? A time we won't want to fuck you, darling?"

More red on her cheeks. More black taking over her pupils. "But puke? Gro—"

"No buts." The door clicks shut behind me, and Liam turns the key, locking us in. He walks up to her, helping her out of her dress. Strokes her scars, her entire belly. He then grabs her chin. "Your eyes were begging for us to be inside you. Make you come. You're a horny little thing, and we're here to tend to your problem. We don't give a fuck about body fluids. Unless…"

"Unless." I step in and tear her panties in half from her pussy while Damien relieves her of her bra. I inhale her underwear, my eyes staying on her the whole time.

Her gaze turns hot, hotter still, when I tell her, "Unless it's your soaked pussy, sweetheart. In that case, we give all the fucks."

"How wet is she?" Damien gestures for the wet fabric, and I pass it on to him.

"Soaked."

He sucks in a breath, making a satisfied sound at the back of his throat.

"Little flame." Liam wraps an arm around Quinlan's back, his lips crushing into hers.

He's demanding. Aggressive. The complete opposite of how he handles her carefully onto the bed on her back. He crawls between her legs, sliding his tongue from her slit to her clit.

"Love the taste of you."

"Liam, please."

Her plea drags him away from her pussy. He climbs up her body, caging her between his forearms. When he settles between her thighs, small whimpers and urgent pleas spill from her pretty mouth.

She spreads her legs wider for him, and we don't need the panties to smell her anymore. No. Her arousal carries to us, so delicious that my mouth waters.

But it’s not about the scent. It’s about possession. About our sick, primal needs. Liam lifts a hand from the bed and Damien gives him her panties. His eyes roll to the back of his head the moment he mashes the fabric to his nose.

I lose my shirt, as does Damien. They fall in a heap on the floor with our belts. With our goddamn hearts.

We’d join them, pleasure her in her three holes, except the pregnancy has changed our dynamics. We’re cautious. Sort of. Doing the best we can.

So we watch, crossing our arms and letting Liam roll his hips. Soak the front of his pants with her arousal. Keep Quinlan’s torn panties pressed to his nose.

This woman who grinds and moans beneath Liam—the woman who stole our hearts—is perfect. Every facet, every smile, every tear, every mood swing. All of it is up there, perfect.

“Liam, please.” Quinlan’s fingertips caress his cheeks, skim the scar tissue in a way that makes him groan. “Please. Fuck me already. I need you. I have to have you. I’m so horny it hurts. Ple—”

“I love seeing your mouth full.” Her panties go between her lips, and Liam shifts his hips up to take himself out.

God, my dick strains in my pants. I have to do something with my hands before I tear him off her. I remove her flats. Kiss the arch of one foot while Damien does the same with her other foot.

Her muffled moans. The sweet shiver raking over her body. It’s intoxicating, and I wish I could stay on my knees and worship her through it all.

The need to be there and watch her face light up when Liam pummels into her is stronger.

“Our little cum slut. All gagged and gorgeous.” He removes the panties from her mouth, tosses them. “I changed my mind about the gag. Need to hear you. Beg for me. Beg for us to fill your swollen pussy, Quinlan.”

“Please. Please, please, my God, please.” Her nails dig into his back, her entire body arching for him. “Fill me up, I’m begging. I’ll die without it. Fuck, it hurts how much I need you.”

“Such a good girl.” Liam cups both sides of her face, angling his hips. He pushes into her in one shove, settles in, then ruts into her. His abdomen doesn’t so much as graze her belly, but the rest of him does. Lips, hands, thighs. “You’d have been on your knees for me if I told you right now,

wouldn’t you? On all fours. Crawling like the needy little thing you are. Would’ve done anything for my cock.”

Her *yes* is a strangled groan. She lifts her feet, her heels pressing to Liam’s ass.

“Yeah, you would.” He kisses her like he’d never have another chance to do it. Kisses her like I want to. Like I crave to. “That’s why you’re such a good girl. My sweet whore, squeezing me like this. Oh, *fuck*,” he moans when her mouth parts in a silent cry. When her orgasm hits. “Quinlan, fuck.”

My cock jerks in my pants, precum wetting the tip when he comes. I love both of them. Watching her come around him, listening to her senseless mumbling. It’s a close second to being the one inside of her.

Close.

A few harsh thrusts from Liam, and Damien steps in. He’s no longer hiding the scars on his abdomen. Quinlan knows us inside out. And just like she told Liam, she thinks Damien wears them so fucking well. That they’re a sign of his bravery. Of his devotion to his foster siblings.

“I’m addicted to your moans, you know that?” He’s inclined on the wall behind the bed, leaning back on the pillows. Reaching his arms for Quinlan. “Going to drag more of those out of you.”

Liam pulls out and flips her on all fours. Her cunt is wet, their orgasms dripping the inside of her thighs and Liam shoves it back in. Doing so won’t put a fourth baby in her.

But her moans, Jesus. How her head drops. The push back of her hips.

How can we not give it to her?

“Go to Damien, little flame.” Once Liam’s done, he places his hand on the curve of her ass.

“That’s right, darling.” Damien beckons her to him as he slides down to lie on the bed. The glint in his eye as he shoots me a look is an invitation. He wants me to make this even better for her. To be a little less careful. “Crawl to me.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

I don’t see her eyes when I remove the rest of my clothes in a haze. Don’t see the corner of her mouth quirking as she sways her gorgeous hips on her way to Damien.

Don’t need any proof of just how much she enjoys herself. How badly she gets off on teasing Damien. On teasing any of us.

I’m the happiest when she’s happy. She doesn’t know it, but I’d be the one on my hands and knees for her, if that’s what would make her happy. I’d do any-fucking-thing.

“That’s it, baby,” he praises her as she comes closer, his voice hoarse. “I’m your Daddy. Now come sit on me. Fucking ride me.”

Liam’s in the armchair next to the bed. Hard again, stroking himself.

It’s impossible not to be, when Quinlan’s like that. Seductive. Glorious. Not afraid of taking what she craves for herself.

Which she does. She straddles Damien, and he holds the base of his cock up for her. Grabs her hips with one hand and helps her lower on his length.

“Not so fast.” I’m behind her. I have my hands on her hips, above Damien’s, spreading her for me. Tilting her hips up and away from Damien’s cock.

Pulling her sweet little cunt to my mouth.

I’m dying to pleasure her. That’s why my tongue dips into her dripping hole, why I take extra care in rubbing her walls. Suck on her juices and Liam’s cum.

I’ve gotten used to tasting my friends on her. It’s us. It’s right. It’s so fucking right.

“Rome.” My name’s on her lips. She cries harder when I tilt my head to find her red, taut clit and suck.

I would’ve made her come on my tongue, except I’ve run out of time. I’ll only have her after Damien does.

“My name.” We move together, him and I. I straighten on my knees, and he pulls her to him, impaling Quinlan on his cock. “Say my name, darling.”

“Damien.” There’s no hesitation, not a second of it. He grinds her on him, kisses her, steals her breath with every stroke of his cock, and she still moans, “Damien, fuck me, please.”

I spit on her tighter hole, then cut my gaze to Liam. He leans forward in his chair, his rapt attention on Quinlan’s face. Hypnotized by her.

So am I. I return my attention to her ass, rubbing my saliva around her the rim, grabbing a fistful of her ass cheek.

“You drive me crazy, sweetheart.” I can’t help myself. Can’t go slow and gentle. I need to stretch that other hole. I’ve been dying to have her there. Everywhere. “You make me want things,” I hiss, cursing. Push my thumb deeper. “Filthy things. Defile you in so many ways. Even more so now that you’re carrying our children.”

“Do it,” Quinlan groans, her plea choked.

“Do what?” Damien slows, grabbing her by the hair and turning her face to me without hurting her. I can tell he’s being gentle. I can tell it’s costing him. “You’ll have to be more specific, darling.”

Her lips are swollen, parted. A blush has taken over her cheeks.

“Fuck me there. I want—no, I *need*—you in my ass, Rome.”

I shake my head, though deep down, I’m already in there. Already making her wet enough, stretched enough so it wouldn’t hurt.

Her pout is fucking adorable. “The doctor said it’s okay.”

My hand cracks down on her ass.

“You asked?” I spit on the hole I’ve been denying myself for weeks. “You asked your doctor if two men can stretch you like this?” Two fingers go into her.

She groans. Liam does too.

I curl my fingers inside her. Pump in and out of her ass. I’m high on the sounds she can’t stop making. On how she clenches around me.

“Told him you’re our little sex toy?” She’s full of my fingers and my saliva. I spit on her again. As rough as I’m being, she needs the prep. We haven’t been inside her ass for too long. “That you’re a whore for three men?”

“I have needs.” She slides up on Damien’s cock. Pushes into my fingers. “So yes, I asked.”

“Who did you say we were to you?” Damien pulls her face to him, his voice hoarse with lust.

None of us explained to her doctors who the hell we were to Quinlan. We pay them extra to keep their mouths shut. Not to ask any questions. But if Quinlan asked for their advice about being fucked in more than one hole, she had to have told them something.

No, I’m not mad. I’m curious as much as Dame is. As much as Liam is, who stopped fucking his hand and is just there, staring at her.

“Hmm? What was it, Quinlan? You said we’re your kidnappers?” Damien’s hands are on her neck, going down to her breasts and up to her cheeks. When she doesn’t answer, he pulls her to him, his lips parting on her neck, where he bites her. “The men who’d been obsessed with you for years? Psychopaths? Your owners, who wouldn’t stop fucking you until you were pregnant?”

“I… I said you were my fiancés.” Damien releases her face, and her beautiful gray eyes dance between the three of us. “I said I’m yours. And that I’d be miserable if I couldn’t have you inside of me together. They can’t tell anyone anything under their NDA, right?”

“Adorable.” Liam releases a breath, his tone gentle and so full of love.

“No, they can’t.” I spit on my hand, rubbing myself. Lubing my cock for her, even though my tip is already leaking. “Clever girl. Sweet girl.”

“I warned you, though, about lying.” Damien pinches her sensitive nipple. “Didn’t I, darling?”

She gasps. Finds his eyes, her body tensing. “I wasn’t lying.”

His cock driving harder into her. Slow and rough. He gave her a big enough hint to our surprise, that he’s gone silent. Too choked, if I had to guess.

“We’re not your fiancés.” Liam digs into the suitcase he left by the nearest wall. He extracts four boxes that he places on the bedside table. “We’re marrying you. We’re your husbands. As of today.”

Polygamy is a felony in the state of Illinois.

So is kidnapping.

We don’t give a fuck about either law.

A marriage license or outsiders’ approval means jack shit to us. We haven’t made it official in *our* eyes yet because we planned to surprise Quinlan with the wedding at Liam’s parents’ home.

Earlier, they sent us pictures of their backyard, of the lanterns they’d scattered around and the cake they’d ordered. We could have dinner over there instead of the wedding itself, sure.

We’re getting married, and we’re doing it now.

“You said we had time.” Quinlan’s eyebrows shoot up, and Damien cups her cheeks again, forces to look at him while he fucks her. “Months. That you wanted to do something special.”

She didn’t want a big party. Didn’t care for a dress or a ceremony. Quinlan demanded the four of us have our gold wedding bands on as soon as we put the diamond on her finger.

We were the ones who insisted on making it into a big thing.

I groan, nudging the tip of my cock to her opening. Putting a ring on her after we just fucked her in the plane isn’t a big thing. It’s not a white dress and a four-layer cake.

It’s *our* thing.

“And this isn’t special?” Liam slides his hand between Quinlan and Damien, and I feel it.

The second he touches her clit, she clenches over the tip of my cock. I want to slam into her so badly that I have to physically stop myself. I have to slow down for her.

“You’re telling us you prefer to wait?” He rubs her, his lips planting wet kisses on her back.

“No. This *is* special. I was—” Her voice is laced with tears of frustration. Of need. “You know I want… Please. Don’t stop.”

“We know.” My patience has been stretched thin. There’s nothing left when I finally slam into her, going balls deep in her ass. She screams, and it’s so sweet. So mine. “You’ll get it. We’ll give you the world.”

I’m trying—Lord, am I trying—to be slow. I bend without putting my weight on her. Damien moves beneath us, his lips on her cheek.

My lips brush past her other cheek, trailing slowly to her ear. “Anything you want. Wife.”

“Oh, God.” Her pregnant, perfect, soft body becomes pliant in our arms.

The three of us don’t let her down. We won’t ever.

We stroke, thrust, and ravage her. We tell her what a good girl she is. Coax three orgasms out of her before either of us comes. Before Liam empties himself on her pretty lips.

Twenty minutes later, we’re showered, wearing lounge clothes and back on the bed. On clean sheets.

Liam’s at the far right, and I’m at the left side of the bed. Quinlan sits on Damien’s lap, her back to his chest. She snuggles into him, but her love is so strong that it carries to Liam and me as if we were the ones holding her.

The four black boxes from the bedside table lie in her lap.

“Do we…” In comparison to what we just did, this is nothing. It makes Quinlan’s flustered state even more adorable. “Say our vows? Or should we skip it?”

“Fuck no.” I grab her box. The one with a small gold Q engraved on it.

We haven’t written our vows. Preferred it to be spontaneous. Original. Us.

That’s exactly what we’re going to do.

Since she’s been Damien’s first, I pop the box open for him. He plucks out the first thin gold band out of three. His smile wavers, the emotions cracking his well-constructed veneer.

His chin quivers, and that's when Liam pulls her into his arms. She has to see this. His heart. His devotion. How much he loves her.

"Darling." Her hand is in his, and he holds her firmly, his undivided attention fixed on her. "For the longest time, I considered the moment you were born the best one of my life. You saved me. You saved my foster siblings. You did it when no one else would or could. You were so special that my monster fell for you and kicked us out. You were pure and wonderful and perfect, and that was enough for me to know you're the best thing to ever happen to me. That was everything. I *loved* you for it. I adored you even when I knew I'd use you to get back at him. I loved you as my savior. I loved you as the little sister I could never talk to or hug or play with. I was content with loving you from afar. Then my love grew alongside you. It evolved, and when I got to have you all to myself… When you became ours… Fuck."

He shakes his head. Once. Wipes a tear from Quinlan's cheek. Smiles. "I never loved anything more. I'm obsessed and desperate and fucking insane for you. You're everywhere, darling. Flowing through my veins. All the thoughts running through my head. You're the air I breathe, do you understand? I'd die without you. They won't need to burn me for my body to turn to ashes. I'd be nothing if I can't have you. I won't ever fail you for as long as I live. If I die before you, I'll just come back again in another form. I'll be your husband for an eternity. I'll always love you. Always protect you. Be the man you need."

"Damien." Quinlan's chin wobbles. Her hand quivers in his as he slips the ring on her.

He sucks in a breath. I can hardly catch one myself.

"My wife." When he brings her knuckles to his lips, Damien's the most serious I've ever seen him. "My forever."

The gold band on her delicate finger shines just as bright as her diamond. Liam puts Damien's in her hand.

"Damien. You psychotic, sweet, caring man. You've owned me from that day you stalked me home. Your sapphire eyes talked before your mouth ever did. I saw you through them. The real you." He nods. He knows. The three of us know how wise beyond her years Quinlan is. How perceptive. "Thank you for being my guardian angel. For waiting. For accepting me the way I am. I'm no savior, but I hope—fuck, I wish with everything in me—

that I'll always be the person you turn to. You're one third of my entire world and I love you. I love you, Damien Black."

"I love you, wife." He grins as the gold band slides down his finger. His second ring finger to be marked by her.

This isn't my turn to tell her everything. I want to. My lips crave to move. My heart to slice itself open for her.

But it's because I'm that desperate for it that I take her so she's facing Liam.

The embers in his eyes are shimmering, and he looks part relieved, part grateful. He shifts on the bed, holds her ring in his hand and her fingers clutched in his other palm.

It's beautiful to watch. Makes my heart warm and, fuck, that's okay. I can be soft around these people and it's perfectly fine.

"Loving you is the most uncomplicated emotion I've ever felt." His mouth twitches. His lungs expand with a deep breath. "You take up every available space in my heart. Have been there for years. A healing wildfire. A nurturing force of nature. You bring life. You shine a light so bright the sun has nothing on you. Little flame, I've always figured that if I controlled the fire—if I just kept flicking my Zippo—I'd be okay. I'd be in control. I don't need it anymore. I have a fire of my own…"

His hand clutches hers, and he lifts both their hands so his knuckles graze her cheek. Stroking her. "And it's the kind of fire that I don't need to tame. I'll be the happiest man to burn alongside you. With you. Always."

"Liam." Quinlan's cheeks glisten with tears. So many of them.

He slips the second wedding ring on her finger.

Waiting for her to wear mine is agony. I hug her, my lips resting on her shoulder. That's all I'll have until it's my turn.

"Go on, sweetheart," I whisper in her ear. "I don't want to punish a pregnant woman, but I would if you don't hurry."

"I'm crying, damn it." She scoffs.

Fucking scoffs at me. And that's the most adorable sound I've ever heard. Especially when Damien and Liam crack a smile at her.

"I love you, Liam." Damien places Liam's ring in Quinlan's palm, and she holds on to it. "You are so easy to love. Except…that's not why I love you. I love you for how you give me everything and ask for nothing in return. I love that you do talk to me. That you're harsh and soft and just… yourself. Your heart, baby." She leans forward while I grip her hips for

balance, kissing his chest. I help her sit back, and Liam wipes a tear off her cheeks. Not like it matters. They won't stop pouring. "You have such a beautiful soul. Even when you're quiet. Even when you're at work. My soul is with you wherever you go. I'll be your fire. I'll be your ice. I'll be your wife for eternity. There'll never be a day I'll be willing to spend without you."

"My wife." He cups her cheeks as soon as the ring settles on his ring finger, his thumb tracing along Quinlan's tattoo.

"My husband." Her palms find his cheeks. Her hand caresses his scar reverently. Adoringly.

"Before Rome loses it." Damien's amused tone doesn't ruin their moment.

They both smile when they break apart. Quinlan's still crying when my best friends twist her to me.

"Your eyes in the morning," I start once Liam passes me my ring. I have Quinlan's palm in mine, her full attention on me. My goddamn heart is in my throat. "That first second after a long night. Having you awake, back with us from your dreams. Nothing beats it. Nothing is better than that, Quinlan."

Whether she wakes up with one of or more of us inside any of her holes. With our tongues on her pussy and breasts and neck. When she's cuddled between us on a lazy Sunday.

Whenever she opens her eyes, she takes my breath away.

The gleam in her eyes and her reassuring nod tell me she remembers every single time she woke up with us.

"I will never take a single day, a single split-fucking-second with you, for granted. To have you in our lives—as our *wife*—is the greatest gift you could've ever given any of us." I'm trying hard not to be too rough on her hand, not to hold so tight. I don't know that it's working. I don't know anything other than how I'm hers and she is mine. "None of us could ever live without you. None of us would survive. And I'm sorry. For all the years we couldn't come get you. For all the time we were forced to spend apart. Those years are over. You belong to us. I—Christ…"

Being this sentimental is a punch to the gut. The pain hits differently than anything else. This love. These words. They crack my ribs open and it hurts to get through with it.

I have to get through with it.

“I’m marrying you because you’re the light at the end of the tunnel. You helped me slay my dragons. You love my sister and, God, I love you even more for it. I had no idea I could, but I do.” This part worried me the most. How they’d get along. Fate, as cruel as it’d been, came through for us. All the pieces have ended up falling into place. “You’re beautiful, inside out. Every part of you is wild and wonderful and perfect. All the money in the world couldn’t buy a single day with you. No words could describe what a blessing it is to be near you. I love you. With all my heart. With every fiber of my being. I love you.”

Her tears continue to roll down her cheeks as I grip her chin. Tug her to me for a kiss that I’ll remember for the rest of my life. “This is it, sweetheart. The final destination. End of the road. I’ll die with your name on my lips, only to come back for you in the afterlife. We’ll always come back for you.”

The third thin band—my wedding ring—completes the stack on Quinlan’s ring finger. I press my lips to her knuckles. The inside of her palm. Her wrist. My hand goes to her swollen stomach, where Liam’s and Damien’s hands already are. Where our children grow inside of her.

“I’ll never leave.” One ragged breath, and she continues, “Just like you never scared me, Rome Langford. You’re a storm of a man, a hurricane personified. But you never scared me. Your physical strength is my comfort. You have the power over my heart and my soul, and that doesn’t scare me either. I’ll always put my life in your hands, blindly. I’m safe with you. I’m a part of you. You own me so thoroughly and I love the idea of belonging to you. You love fiercely, and I love you even more. You’re my everything. My home. My life. My husband.”

“My wife.”

I can’t wait to kiss her. Except I have to wait. For her ring to slide down my finger. For the moment she makes me hers.

And yeah, the ring is nice. It’s a symbol.

It isn’t *this*. This woman with her arms around my neck and her lips on mine. The knowledge that my best friends and sister are safe and with me for life.

Those are the things that have made Quinlan mine a long time ago. Ours.

Our family. Our connection.

This twisted fate. This warped gift from the universe.

All of this.

She’s always been ours. We’ve always been hers.
And that’s how it’ll be until the end of time.
Just.
The three.
Of us.
The end.

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Thank You!

Thank you so much for reading Quinlan!
If you loved Damien, Rome, Liam and Quinlan's sexy shenanigans, I would be eternally grateful for your review ❤

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